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BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM.

## Buffalo Bill's Rough Riders;

Or, TEXAS JACK'S SHARP-SHOOTERS.



BUFFALO BILL FEARLESSLY RODE TO THE RESCUE SINGLE HANDED.



# Buffalo Bill's Rough Riders;

OR,

## Texas Jack's Sharp-Shooters.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM,

AUTHOR OF "BUFFALO BILL" NOVELS, ETC.

### CHAPTER I. UNDER A BAN.

"They hold a hostage from nearly every ranch in this part of the country, with the threat of death hanging over them if we make any effort to resist their lawless deeds."

"But, where are these hostages?"

"Heaven only knows."

"Who are they?"

"The hostages. They are our loved ones, a daughter, a son, some one dearest in the families of the ranchmen for a hundred miles around."

"How did they get possession of them?"

"Caught them when, unsuspecting danger, they rode out on the prairies."

"And you do not know where the abductors are?"

"No, though we have heard from the prisoners that they are well, not badly treated, but held captive until their captors have accomplished some hidden purpose—just what no one appears to know."

"This is a strange story, indeed that you tell me, Senor Otega, one I cannot account for, when I find here in your country fine ranches, well stocked with cattle, comfortable homes, a clever set of people, and yet all under the ban of terror from an unknown foe, whose lawless deeds he protects by holding as a prisoner some loved one of your family."

"It is a situation I cannot just master, and why you ranchmen submit to it is beyond comprehension."

"Ah, Senor, did these unseen, unknown despoilers but hold one dear to you in their power, you too, would be utterly powerless to act."

"You are doubtless right, and as they have dealt a blow against each family in your beautiful country, it holds all the ranchers in the same clutch of fear."

"But why cannot one of the ranchers who is not thus held under restraint make a blow at these lawless kidnappers and robbers?"

"Ah, Senor, who can it be? for there is not a ranch in this valley which has not been afflicted, and so is under the ban; for there is a house where there are no children to claim as hostages, then they are under the threat of instant death if a move is made to resist the accursed tribute under which we all suffer."

"I cannot understand it, as I said; but, who are these despoilers of homes?"

"Senor, you ask in vain, for I know not."

"Who can tell me?"

"Alas! who?"

"Does no one know?"

"I have seen no one who can tell."

"This is even more remarkable, more unaccountable than their deeds. Where is their retreat?"

"No one knows, Senor."

"Are they never seen?"

"Never, Senor, save by their victims."

"Do they have no trails?"

"None have been found."

"You surprise me."

"We are all in the dark, Senor."

"Is no one suspected?"

"Not a soul, Senor."

"Is there no one in your valley whom you suspect of being in league with these human wolves?"

"Not one whom we have a suspicion of. The truth is, Senor, that the deeds of these men are such that we now begin to mistrust each other, and where we were once on a friendly footing, one neighbor is afraid of the other."

"Yet you say all are alike sufferers." "It is true, Senor; but, doubt is creeping in of the friendship of every man who is near us."

"Here in this valley is the settlement of Silver Sands, as you may know, and in and about it dwell over a thousand souls."

"Scattered through the valley, for three score miles around Silver Sands City, are a hundred or more ranches. The owners are all prosperous as far as riches go, yet suffer from this curse of an unseen foe, who strikes at us through those we love."

"Some of these ranches are old haciendas, built a hundred years, strong as forts, comfortable, commodious, and the attaches of the ranch number a score of cattlemen or more, but they are not protected from the foe when he wishes to strike, and all homes are alike."

"As for myself, Senor, I have only my wife now, for our beautiful daughter, a maiden of seventeen, is a hostage to the foe."

"Here is my pleasant home; my cattle I count by thousands; a score of cowboys guard them and my ranch, and yet the unseen enemy has entered here."

"A letter comes from my daughter each month—it has been six since she was captured—telling us she is a prisoner, yet well cared for, and to make no effort at her rescue if we love her."

"So others thus write, but no more."

"Now, Senor, you have the whole story."

"Why I told you I do not know, but there is that in your face to command respect and confidence, though you are an utter stranger to me."

"Then let me introduce myself, Senor Otega, as I am accepting your hospitality for the night."

"My name is William Cody, as I told you, I am an Army Scout at Fort Lyon, under General Carr, and he it was who sent me down into this country as bearer of important dispatches to Santa Fe, from which place I was sent to Fort McRae, and ordered back via Fort Wingate, and that brought me through your country, of which I am glad, for I am determined to help you."

"Ah, Senor! but can you?"

"Did you ever hear of Buffalo Bill, Senor Otega?"

"Oh, Senor, who has not heard of him? He is a man, as all say, who can do anything."

"No, Senor, not so great as that, by any means. But he is a man whose word you can rely upon, and he pledges you his word to rid your fair valley of the curse now upon it—for, Senor, I AM BUFFALO BILL!"

### CHAPTER II.

#### A BOLD RESCUE.

Leaving the ranch of Senor Luis Otega, where he had been most hospitably entertained over night, Buffalo Bill rode along up the beautiful valley encircling a lake many acres in size, and with large trees here and there grouped along its shores.

He was well mounted, and that he was thoroughly armed goes without the saying.

As he rode along in the free and easy manner of the perfect horseman, his appearance was striking and picturesque—that of the finest type of the plainsman.

As he followed the trail bordering the shores of the lake, and stretching afar up the lovely valley, he was more and more impressed with the fine scenery about him.

Here and there, leagues part, a ranch home was to be seen, with tiny spots upon the meadow lands to mark feeding cattle or droves of horses.

"Suddenly, as he passed out of a growth of heavy timber, bordering a stream which flowed over a pebbly bottom into the lake, he beheld, back upon a range, a large hacienda."

It had once been a fine old home, but that was in the long ago, for now it was deserted and, in part, a ruin.

Turning from the trail, Buffalo Bill rode up to the hacienda, passed in through the massive, but now crumbling, gates, and sat on his horse gazing with considerable interest upon the ancient and deserted dwelling.

"It is strange that such a fine old place as this is not occupied, but is allowed to go to ruin."

"Some sad history is, doubtless, connected with it, and these superstitious people give it the go by."

"But, it is even yet an imposing, fine home. What grand woodland is back of it, and what rich meadow lands surround it, while this creek runs right through the walled-in grounds!"

After admiring the venerable hacienda for a while longer, Buffalo Bill rode on his way, following what appeared to be a cattle trail from the ranch toward the lake, but striking it several miles above where he had turned off to go up to the deserted place.

He had not ridden very far when he entered a growth of timber through which the trail ran, and, hearing voices, he halted suddenly, and there came distinctly to his ears, in English:

"Oh, Senor, you have killed him, and I, too, am at your mercy!"

The voice was that of a woman, and where Buffalo Bill, under other circumstances, might have stopped to reconnoitre, or hesitated to count what odds he had to meet, with such words uttered by a woman he did not think of consequences, but drove the spurs into the flanks of his horse and bounded forward to discover who it was that was in need of his strong arm to defend her.

Out of the timber he plunged like a whirlwind, his horse at full speed, and a revolver in each hand.

He came upon a strange, startling, and thrilling scene.

At once he feared that he had made a sad mistake, but it was no time to back out then, and, having made the move, he would take the consequences.

A glance showed him that the odds were against him, for five rough-looking men were grouped beneath a clump of trees.

One of this group wore a black mask that completely shielded his face, but the faces of the other four were not masked.

All were armed, and if they were not a band of outlaws they certainly looked it.

But these four men were not all that riveted the attention of the daring scout, for, at their feet, prone upon his back, was the form of a man.

He was not of their stripe, as but a glance revealed, for he was dressed in the uniform of a Mexican officer.

About his neck was a rope, the noose tightly drawn, and it appeared as though he had been just lowered from the limb of the tree which spread out over him.

And the keen glances of the scout took in yet another sight which thrilled him, and nerved him not to turn his back to odds he had to confront.

He beheld the woman who had uttered the words which had caught his hearing.

With her back to a tree, her hands bound behind her, was a young girl, dark, beautiful in face and form, and clad in a riding habit adorned with gilt buttons.

She was bareheaded, and her hair, black as jet, had become disarranged and fell upon her shoulders.

Her face was deadly pale, and her eyes were fixed upon the men before her.

### CHAPTER III.

#### BUFFALO BILL'S BOLD BLUFF.

A cry of hope came from the lips of the maiden as she beheld the coming of Buffalo Bill, while a look of despair came over her face as she saw that he was alone—only one man against five!



So intent were the men upon their work that they did not see, or seem to hear the coming rescuer until he was almost upon them. Then they started in surprise; their hands fell upon their weapons, and, just as Buffalo Bill was about to open fire the masked leader shouted out:

"Hold! don't dare to fire on that man!"

All seemed bewildered at the order from their leader, but it was obeyed, for the four men did not draw the weapons upon which their hands rested.

Buffalo Bill heard the strange order, and could not understand it, but he did not fire, as he had intended.

A word to his horse and the well-trained animal halted within twenty feet of the group.

But the scout still held his weapons at a level, and his clear voice was threatening and stern, and he demanded:

"Well, what does this outrage mean, for I see that deadly work has been done here?"

"Oh, sir, they have killed my escort, I fear, and were going to torture me to force a secret from my lips when you so daringly came to my aid."

"But, woe be unto you if no other help is near, for these men are desperate, and would stop at no crime."

The words were uttered quickly and earnestly by the young girl, and promptly came the reply of the scout:

"Have no fear, Senorita, for there is ample help at hand, as these fellows will find out when I signal for those near, or a shot calls them."

"Now, sir, as you are the leader, though apparently fearing to show your face, I demand your surrender and the submission of your men to an officer of the United States Army."

The masked man halted, while the faces of his followers grew white.

"Buffalo Bill, I know you, and my order to my men not to fire on you saved your life."

"I am not so sure of that, for it is my way to take big chances, while if you had killed me your punishment would have promptly followed."

"Do you surrender, or shall I call for aid?"

"See here, I know you, and I have a motive for not wishing to kill you; so I am willing to come to terms, as your men are not yet in sight."

"Talk quick, then, or you will be too late. Who are you?"

"That I shall not answer," and as Buffalo Bill cast a quick glance behind him the others looked anxiously in the same direction, as though expecting to see soldiers ride into sight.

"Never mind my name, then, but tell me what terms you ask, for we do not wish to be retarded in our march by a lot of cutthroat prisoners."

The words were boldly uttered, and struck home, and the masked leader replied quickly:

"Let us go; we ask no more."

"Then go, and quickly, for you have not a moment to spare; and, remember, when I have learned this lady's story of your attack on her and her escort I may change my mind and pursue you."

The start of the men who were unmasked was positively ludicrous, for they vanished away as though starting on a footrace, and without awaiting the command of their leader.

He would have said more, but thought better of it, when left alone by his men, and he, too, went off at a fleet run, calling back:

"Some day we will meet again, Buffalo Bill."

The answer of the scout was to send a bullet after the masked ruffian, but with no intention of hitting him, and then to call out in a voice that echoed through the timber:

"Ho, men! Here to the rescue, ho!"

This but added wings to the flying outlaws' feet, as they fairly tore along

like race horses, and quickly disappeared over a rise a few hundred yards away.

"Now, Senorita, you must mount behind me, and I will take you to your home. You can then send back for the body of your companion," said the scout.

"Oh, Senor, but I do not believe he is dead, for he moved when you fired that shot," cried the young girl, as Buffalo Bill, having dismounted, was rapidly untying the lariat which bound her hands behind her back, and which also made her fast to a tree.

"Then we must not desert him if he yet lives. But let me tell you that I am wholly alone, and have no help near."

"I played a bold bluff only to scare off those men, for they were far more than I wanted under the circumstances," and, having freed the maiden, he turned to the prostrate form of the Mexican officer, while the young girl gazed at him with a look of wonder in her large eyes at the daring part he had played to rescue her.

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### A CORRECT SURMISE.

The experience Buffalo Bill had had in his long career upon the frontier with wounds and hurts, enabled him to very quickly determine the condition of the Mexican officer.

He had played a bold game of bluff, and won, in driving off the outlaws; but he realized that his being known to the masked leader had been greatly in his favor, for his order not to fire on him had, perhaps, saved his life, his being wounded, or the killing of his horse.

But he did not wish to rely too much upon the masked leader's forbearance toward him, if he should discover that he was all alone, had no help near, and should return.

So he was most anxious to get away as soon as possible from that vicinity.

Kneeling by the side of the officer, he was glad to see that he was returning to consciousness.

How severely he had been hurt he could only guess at, but the man was breathing hard now, and the scout bathed his face with water from his canteen and forced a few swallows into his mouth.

Then the eyes opened, and, as they met the gaze of the scout, they rested there a moment.

"I hope you are better, Senor."

"Yes—where is the Senorita Consuelo?"

The question was asked in a low tone, evidently with an effort, and there was a foreign accent to the English spoken.

"I am here, Captain Delrol, and unharmed; but I feared they had taken your life."

"This brave gentleman rescued us."

"It is important, Senor, that we be on the move from here at once, for I am all alone, and those miscreants may return when they discover the fact."

"Here is a flask of brandy—a swallow of it will strengthen you, so make every effort in your power to pull yourself together so that we can get away."

The scout spoke in a decided tone, and the Mexican realized that what he said was true. He took a draught from the flask, while Buffalo Bill turned to the maiden and said:

"You were mounted, of course, Senorita. Where are your horses?"

"In the timber, there, Senor, where we had halted at a spring."

"I was gathering wild flowers, and we had wandered here, when those men sprang upon us."

"I will get your horses and soon return with them."

"Meanwhile try and rouse your companion to action."

Leaping into his saddle Buffalo Bill rode rapidly in the direction indicated by the girl, and soon came upon the spring, and near it the two horses were hitched.

They were both fine animals and rich-

ly caparisoned with Mexican trappings adorned with silver.

Unfastening them he led them rapidly back to the spot where the officer and the maiden were, the former having risen to his feet, and was apparently recovering from the severe choking he had received, for when the scout had knelt by his side the noose was found to be drawn close about his neck.

"Now we must be off, for I dread the return of those outlaws under the circumstances we are in."

"Were they mounted?"

"I think not, Senor, for we saw no horses," said the girl.

With an effort, apparently, the girl then leaped into her saddle, while Buffalo Bill aided the Mexican to mount, for he was still weak and miserable.

So, leaping into his own saddle, he then said:

"Now, will you be guide, Senorita, that I may escort you to your home?"

Ere she could reply a voice called out through the timber:

"He was alone!"

"Come, men, and we will yet be in time to recapture them!"

But with a word from Buffalo Bill the Mexican officer and the girl started on through the timber, the former saying sadly:

"I am powerless to aid you, Senor."

"I will check them if they are mounted, and if not we have nothing to fear. You ride on and I will overtake you."

With this Buffalo Bill wheeled toward the timber, where he soon saw the masked leader of the outlaws, several hundred yards distant, apparently urging his men, who were yet unseen, to follow him.

"I'll remind him that the back track is the safest one for him to take," said the scout, and, unfastening his rifle from where it hung on the left side of his saddle, he took quick aim, and, without trying to hit the masked man, sent a bullet so close to him that he quickly sprang to shelter behind a tree, just as his men came into view, and apparently with no strong desire to follow their leader in his effort to recapture those whom the scout had rescued from them.

#### CHAPTER V.

##### A MYSTERY OF THE VALLEY.

The five outlaws having returned, as Buffalo Bill had correctly surmised that they would, he decided to still make a bold stand of it.

The four men who were unmasked did not seem to share their leader's enthusiasm, and Buffalo Bill seeing it muttered:

"I must make another bluff, for if they have horses near they can be very dangerous, especially as that officer looked as though he would fall from his saddle at every step of his horse."

"I'll throw a bullet among those fellows, not caring just where it hits."

This he did, and a yell greeted the shot, as one of the men was hit by the bullet.

That he was not badly wounded was shown by the way the four men ran back over the ridge their chief following them at a pace that threatened to soon bring him up with the others in his place as leader.

Buffalo Bill laughed at the footrace, and with a yell spurred forward in pursuit.

When he gained the ridge he saw that the outlaws had disappeared.

But he fired a few shots, merely to let them know that he was about.

The nature of the ground beyond the ridge was wild in the extreme, seamed with ravines and overgrown with timber.

A horse would not be able to travel there, but men could readily make good their escape.

If the outlaws had been mounted, they would have left their horses in the can-



yon that ended at the ridge, and come upon the plateau on foot.

Buffalo Bill had also noticed that not one of the men had carried a rifle.

After taking in the country as thoroughly as he could from his point of observation, Buffalo Bill turned back to overtake the Mexican officer and the young girl to tell them that they were safe.

He reached the spot where he had just seen them, and was riding by, when his eyes caught a sparkling object upon the ground.

Dismounting, he picked it up, and was amazed to find a trinket of rare beauty.

It was a band of solid gold, hinged in the centre, and that locked when clasped, for there was a tiny keyhole there.

It was studded with gems representing a shield, and this device was divided in half, the one on the right being the American flag in gems; the one on the left the Mexican flag.

The colors were of rubies, emeralds, and other precious stones.

Within the bracelet was engraven the words:

"Beware! If taken from the wrist the charm is broken."

"That beautiful girl will go into a spasm when she finds this bracelet is gone, so I must hasten to overtake her. Perhaps those fellows took it from her wrist, and dropped it—no, the clasp does not seem to be broken."

With this Buffalo Bill put the bracelet into his pocket, and rode rapidly on, following the trail of the two horses.

After going for a considerable distance, and seeing no trace of them, he said:

"That officer must have improved rapidly, to push on as they did, for the tracks here show that they were riding in a gallop.

"If it was not to return this bracelet, I'd let them go, and continue on my way."

Arriving at the creek, which wound down from the mountains, passing through the deserted hacienda he had visited, the scout, to his surprise, saw that the trail of the two horses ended there.

They could go but two ways, either by following the stream to the lake, or going up it to the hacienda.

"Can they have wished to throw me off their trail?"

"It seems so.

"Perhaps, hearing my shots, they thought perhaps that I was killed, and were trying to elude the outlaws.

"I would rather think it that way than to feel they were dodging me.

"But I have this bracelet, and must return it, so will push on to the hacienda, where I expect to find them."

As he came to the adobe walls of the hacienda, beneath which the stream made its way, Buffalo Bill saw by the wet rocks just then that the horses had come that way.

Further on he found the trail, and followed it in through the ruined gateway.

But there it ended, and his calls brought no response.

Dismounting, he searched the old ruin, but could find no trace of the horses or their riders.

There was no way to leave the hacienda walls save by that one entrance, for a rear one was fastened up, and the tracks certainly led there.

"They are eluding me, that is certain, so. I will hunt no further.

"Some one in the settlement up the valley can tell me who they are, and I can leave the bracelet for the girl in responsible hands.

"Well, this is another mystery to set down to the credit of this most mysterious valley," and the scout rode on his way, as before he had gone to the rescue of the strange couple he had found in such distress.

## CHAPTER VI.

### ON SPECIAL DUTY.

"Well, Cody, I am glad to see you back, for I began to fear that at last you had met your fate; but your going down to Fort McRae and back by Wingate explains your long stay, and I congratulate you upon the good services you have rendered."

"Thank you, General Carr, and I have a favor to ask of you, sir, now I have returned."

"All right, Cody, I can guess what it is, for you are anxious for a leave of absence to go to Leavenworth to see your wife and child—it is granted."

"I did intend to ask leave and go home, sir, as winter is coming on, and there will not be much doing up here at Fort Lyon; but I have determined to go upon an expedition of duty, and thus dispose of my leave, unless you will order me on the service when you learn of what I have to tell you, sir."

"Perhaps I may, so let me hear what it is you have in view, Cody."

"I returned from Fort McRae to Wingate, sir, through a country but seldom traveled, for no direct trail leads via old Fort Tule Rosa, and by accident, as it were, struck a lonely valley around a long and narrow lake in the Tule Rosa Range."

"A country very little known, Cody."

"Yes, sir, very little to outsiders; but it is a beautiful valley, and has in it a settlement known as Silver Sands City, for there is a small silver mining interest."

"I had not heard of it."

"No, sir, but it is true, and the settlement numbers a thousand people, is an adobe village, and the dwellers there are Mexicans, with a mixture of Americans and Indians."

"From Silver Sands settlement the ranches branch out in the valley, and there are some fine haciendas among them, the rancheros being rich in cattle and horses, and a mixture of Americans and Mexicans of the better class."

"You surprise me, Cody, and interest me greatly," said General Carr.

"I was greatly surprised and interested myself, sir, during the two days and nights I was in the valley."

"All seems peaceful there, too, General, and yet upon that valley rests a cruel curse, for it is under a ban of outlawry that is most mysterious, and the more terrible because the actors are unseen, unknown, and therefore secret foes."

"Pray tell me more of this mysterious land, Cody, for you have my curiosity greatly excited," the General said, earnestly.

"I wish to tell you all, sir, for upon this strange community hangs my mission of duty that I ask to go upon."

"Well."

"I was struck with the beauty of the valley, the apparent wealth of the rancheros, and stopped one night at the home of an American, who was half Mexican, for he had married a lady of Mexico, and had taken her name, that of Otega—Luis Otega was his name."

"He received me with greatest hospitality, and we became so friendly that he told me that night, as we sat together, of the ban upon the fair valley."

"I questioned him closely, for I wished to know all that I could discover, and he made known, though with considerable dread at doing so, that the curse upon the community was from the deeds of a secret foe."

"Who that foe was no one could tell, and yet he was most strongly in evidence at every ranch in the valley, upon which he levied tribute, or blood money, I may say, and got it."

"Astonishing!"

"But how did he do this?"

"By a placard stuck on the gate of a ranch house, or hacienda, demanding a certain sum to be placed in a designated spot on a day or night named, under

the penalty, if refused, of a death in the family."

"This must be looked to, Cody."

"That is just what I am after, General."

"But why do not the rancheros have the nerve to put this unseen robber to the test?"

"They have, sir, and to their bitter cost."

"He has carried out his threats, then?"

"He has, sir, promptly and without mercy, and that is why they no longer refuse the demands upon them."

"I can hardly wonder at it, when an unseen foe strikes at those they love."

"He does more, sir, for he has taken from each home a hostage, keeping them comfortably, as they are allowed to write home, but holding them against refusal of his demands, and threatens to thus keep them until he gains the purpose for which he is striving, a certain amount of money, I take it, sir."

"There is no doubt of it, and it is a most novel way of gaining his ends; but still I believe he can be checkmated."

"I feel confident of it, sir, and for that reason I wish to ask your permission, General Carr, to go to that valley and solve that mystery, hunt down that unseen and unknown foe."

"You know, sir, that Scout Texas Jack brought with him a dozen Texans as scouts, and they are wild riders, superb lassoists, dead shots, all speak Spanish more or less fluently, and are utterly fearless."

"They are all that you say, Cody."

"Now, General, I wish to take Texas Jack and his sharpshooters from Texas, and go to that valley and take possession of a deserted hacienda I saw there, and turn ranchero, buying cattle and horses, and establishing myself there for the one purpose of discovering the daring leader who thus threatens, robs, and persecutes these people, and I am sure, sir, that I can unearth a mystery that will fully compensate for our time."

"Cody, you can go, and take the men you ask for."

"You have been there, understand the situation, and know what you are doing, so I leave all to you."

"Thank you, sir, and I will tell you that I have made one strong bid for favor there in the rescue of a beautiful young lady who is known as the Lady Hermit of the Hacienda, and the Fair Recluse," and Buffalo Bill told the story of his rescue of the Mexican maiden from the men who had evidently kidnapped her and the officer who was her companion.

General Carr listened most attentively, and then said:

"Cody, you shall not take your leave to go on this mission, for I will order you upon it as a special duty."

"When will you start?"

"At once, sir," was the prompt reply.

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE SCOUT'S MISSION.

"Now, General, I wish to tell you something else," said Buffalo Bill, after the story of the rescue had been told, and he had been given permission to return with his scouts to the mysterious valley, and ferret out those who held it under such a cruel ban.

"Tell me all you wish, Cody, for you have interested me greatly," replied the General.

"I told you, sir, that the young lady whom I rescued was known as the Fair Recluse."

"Now, I am partly guessing at that, sir, and I will tell you why."

"When I got that Mexican officer mounted, and started him off with the lady, sir, I went back to play another game of beautiful bluff with the five outlaws."

"You were too rash, Cody."

"No, sir, I was looking at all chances, sir, before taking them."



"But, finding the outlaws had made good time into a canyon, I returned on the trail of the officer and girl.

"As I found the spot where the hanging had been done, I caught sight of this, sir, and picked it up."

The General took the costly bracelet handed to him by the scout, and examined it attentively.

"Why, this is worth a small fortune, Cody, and is very beautiful and unique."

"Yes, sir, but the owner of it dodged me, sir, as I will make known to you."

Then Buffalo Bill told of the trail he had followed to the deserted hacienda, and continued:

"Now, I rode on up that valley to the settlement of Silver Sands City without meeting a soul.

"That city, as they call it, is a mile in length, beautifully situated, and is composed of adobe houses, the people seeming to have very little to do.

"Some mine in the mountains, others of the men are cowboys on the ranches down the valley, there are several stores, saloons, and a blacksmith shop or two, with an old mission chapel and a priest.

"There is a half-way inn there, and if the landlord is not a villain, then his looks belie him.

"I told him I was looking for a ranch, and he told me there were none for sale.

"I asked him about the deserted hacienda, and he said that no one would live there, as it was haunted by evil spirits, and he either believed it, or could lie with as straight a face as I ever saw.

"He said the place belonged to some one in Mexico, who had inherited it, that every one who had last lived there had died over night, from what cause no one knew, for there were no signs of violence upon them, but all were found dead in the morning, as also every horse, cow, sheep, and dog in the walled-in place."

"This is a remarkable story, Cody."

"Yes, General Carr, but he told it as the truth, and there stands the deserted hacienda, with the graves, thirty-three in number, in one corner of the grounds.

"It was left, then, to go to ruin—to the coyotes, owls, and bats.

"I asked the landlord as much as I dared, to try and find out who the maiden and the Mexican officer were.

"From what I could learn from him, if the one I rescued was the one he had in mind, the lady is known as the Fair Hermitess, and is also called Consuelo, the Recluse.

"She is the daughter of a Mexican noble, but lives alone at her hacienda, which is a fine one, with only her servants and a score of cattlemen, Mexicans, and all appear to worship her.

"But no one in the valley knows much about her, the landlord said, and who the Mexican officer was he did not know.

"I did not tell him I had rescued them, but merely said I had met them, and her beauty and his fine looks and uniform impressed me.

"I called upon the priest, but he was absent, and so I determined to bring the bracelet on with me, General Carr, and when I go back I shall look up the owner, and then, sir, I shall take the deserted hacienda as my ranch."

"Well, Cody, you are the best judge of just what to do, but I assure you I will not only be anxious about you, but watch the result with great interest.

"If you need aid I will give you letters to the nearest posts, so you will be able to call on them for what men you may wish."

"Thank you, sir, and my idea was to stop at the Government corrals on my way down—for you know they send the cattle southward to feed in the winter—and borrow a lot of steers and horses to drive to my ranch and care for, thus carrying out the idea that I had gone to the valley to settle and make it my home.

"I shall tell the priest that I will pay

rent when the owner demands it, and thus keep my taking possession of the deserted ranch from appearing a lawless act."

"It would be a good idea.

"Come to me when you are ready to start, and I will give you all letters necessary to have you carry out your plans," said General Carr, and Buffalo Bill departed, to prepare for his strange mission to the mysterious valley.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### THE ROUGH RIDERS.

All the garrison at Fort Lyon wondered what was going on when they saw Buffalo Bill ride away from the post at the head of fourteen of the best scouts, most daring Indian fighters, and wildest riders on the frontier.

They were dead shots, all of them, with rifle and revolver; they could throw a lariat like a Mexican, and they could ride as few men could.

Good-looking, most of them, well-formed, bronzed-faced, and with a reckless, devil-may-care air, they were the pride of the post.

Men and horses had been picked for a purpose, it could be plainly seen.

They had extra animals along, and half a dozen pack mules, well loaded with a camp outfit, provisions, and ammunition.

Those that saw them waiting for the start beheld Texas Jack, the noted ranger scout from the Lone Star State, and next in rank to Buffalo Bill at the post.

Then there was another lieutenant of the chief of scouts in Wild Winfield, and these two men had a record to be proud of as plainsmen.

Blue Jacket, Wichita Will, Mustang Frank, Lone Star Sam, and so on down the file were men, until, after the two lieutenants, came twelve good men and true.

"Where are you going, Texas Jack?" asked an officer of cavalry, passing the squad of wild riders.

"Don't know, sir.

"Got orders to get ready for a long trail, and am prepared for a fight, foot-race, or siege, sir."

"I have not heard of any news that causes General Carr to send out Cody and his picked men of rough riders," continued the officer.

"Nor have I, sir."

"Have none of the men an idea?"

"Not one, sir, and we are waiting for Chief of Scouts Cody now, for he has gone to the General for last orders."

As Texas Jack spoke Buffalo Bill appeared, coming from General Carr's quarters.

He was splendidly mounted and armed, and his face was as serene as a May morn.

There was nothing there to indicate anxiety or dread.

"Which way bound, Cody?" asked the major of the post, pausing just then, while the other officer, who had been questioning Texas Jack said: "That's right, Major, for I'm anxious to know; but they are all as close as clams."

"I am going southward on a scout, major," was Buffalo Bill's reply, and, saluting, he rode to the head of the line, and gave the order to march.

The scouts obeyed, following in two files, Texas Jack at the head of one, Wild Winfield leading the other, while two men brought up the rear, to keep the pack mules closed up.

That the band of rough riders were curious about their going was certain, but not a hint came from their chief, and not a man dared to question him.

The start had been made after dinner, and after a ride of twenty-five miles a halt was made for the night.

Supper was had, all eating together around the camp fire, but no word fell from the chief's lips as to where they were going.

The next day forty miles were placed

behind them, and the scouts knew that the chief had started upon a long journey.

So it went on for day after day, from forty to fifty miles being made, the cattle being well cared for, with long noon-day halts, until the Rio Grande River was crossed, and the chief of scouts bore toward the right, into a land that was unknown to his followers.

"We will leave Santa Fe well to our left," said Texas Jack to Wild Winfield one day.

"Yes, but why does not the chief give us a hint of where we are going?"

"He will, in good time."

"Oh, yes; but it is an important trail, I feel sure, and connected with his trip southward which he just returned from."

"No doubt it is; but the Government cattle corrals must be in this course."

"Yes, and I believe we are going after cattle; but to-morrow will tell, as the corrals and grazing grounds are on the headwaters of the San Juan, and that is the way we are pointed now, and we must reach there before two more camps."

The same style of conversation and guesswork the other scouts indulged in, and still the chief said nothing as to their destination, and all decided that it was to the corrals to drive back cattle.

But that night, when they went into camp, Buffalo Bill said, after all had had supper:

"Pards, I have had nothing to say as to our mission, as there was little to tell you.

"But, as we strike the Government corrals at noon to-morrow, I wish to say that we are to get there a large herd of cattle and a band of a hundred or more horses."

"Yes, we supposed that was what we were going for, chief," said Texas Jack.

Buffalo Bill smiled, and replied:

"General Carr thought it best for me not to tell you my purpose until we neared the corrals, and then, if any of you wished to back out, you could remain there, and I could find other men in your place; but I think I picked those who will stand by me."

"Just try us!" cried Texas Jack, and the men all cried out in the same vein.

"Now, though we are going to get cattle and horses, we drive them south instead of north, and I tell you plainly that we are going to a pleasant valley I know of, where I am to turn ranchero, and you are to be my cattlemen.

"That I do this for other motives than posing as a ranchero, you may all be certain, and that there will be hot work ahead of us I feel very confident.

"Does any man wish to remain at the corrals?"

The response to this question of Buffalo Bill was so earnest in the negative that he knew he had nothing to fear from any one of his rough riders.

The next day the corrals were reached, and, presenting his letter to the cavalry officer in command, Buffalo Bill was told to pick out his cattle and horses to suit himself.

The next afternoon the start was made, the rough-riding scouts becoming very readily and willingly herd drivers on their way to the mysterious valley of Silver Sands.

## CHAPTER IX.

### THE MASTER OF THE DESERTED HACIENDA.

It was just one month after his leaving Silver Sands City on his northward trail, after his strange adventure in the mysterious valley, that Buffalo Bill rode up to the little inn where he had before halted, and was greeted by the same Mexican landlord, whom he had not particularly fancied.

Speaking English well, the landlord recognized the handsome scout, and said in a way that was meant to be hospitable, but which was full of curiosity:

"Ah, Senor, you again come this way—is your stay to be short, as before?"



"On the contrary, Senor Buriel, I am here to stay."

"Ah, Senor! you like the Silver Sands Valley, then?"

"Very much."

"You are a gambler, perhaps, Senor, or you have no business?"

"Oh, no, I am a ranchero, and have come to settle thirty miles down the valley, near the lake."

"You amaze me, Senor, for there is no ranch to sell out there."

"There is one unoccupied, and may be for sale."

"I shall take possession of it, herd my cattle in the surrounding country, and, when the owner appears, will pay him what is just."

"Now, tell me, Senor Buriel, if the padre is at home—oh, I see him there, now," and Buffalo Bill walked rapidly over to where a small, dark-faced man was standing, dressed as a Mexican priest.

"The Padre San Juan, I believe?" he said politely.

"Yes, my son, but I know you not."

"No, I am an American, and, passing through this valley, decided to find a home here."

"I called upon you, but you were away from home, and I have just arrived."

"How can I serve you, Senor?"

"I have some miles away my cattle and horses, and my destination is the old deserted hacienda down the valley on the lake."

"I would ask you if you can place me in communication with the owner?"

"I cannot, my son, for the one who fell heir to that truly accursed place is a stranger, and was never here."

"It is a blot upon the valley, and will be a home of ill omen should you dwell there, which, Heaven forbid."

"I thank you, Senor Padre, but my men and cattle are, as I said, near, and to-morrow night I will take possession of the ill-omened place, as you call it, with the pledge to you to pay what is right for its use."

"As we are all men, we need but little household furniture, and that I can buy at your stores here in Silver Sands City."

"But, my son, let me tell you that this whole valley is under a curse."

"A lovely abiding place it is, as far as natural beauty, comforts, and attractions go, but there is a secret fatality resting upon its people, a cruel curse as I have said, and if you remain here, especially within that dreary hacienda with its record of death, you but become another upon whom suffering must fall."

"I will take all chances, Senor Padre, and as the deserted hacienda is to be my home, let me say that I will be happy to entertain you there whenever you pass that way."

"Thank you, Senor, thank you, but only in case duty called me would I cross the threshold of that house, for it is haunted by the cruelest of memories, if not worse."

"I wish you well, Senor, but I have warned you—it was my duty."

Returning to the landlord of the little adobe tavern, Buffalo Bill told him that he wished to make some purchases, and to get a wagon to take them to the deserted hacienda.

"You will go there, then, Senor?"

"Oh, yes."

"The Padre San Juan warned you?"

"Yes, as you did."

"You do not heed warnings, then?"

"I am not superstitious, and so warnings of imaginary evils have no dread for me; but, if warned of a real danger, I heed, as I flatter myself that I am no fool."

The landlord shook his head, and then said he would furnish the means of transportation for what the Senor cared to purchase, and he would take him to the best place at which to buy them.

The purchases were soon made, loaded

in a wagon, and started upon the way for the hacienda, the scout, after having dinner at the tavern, starting on after the rough riders, for they were already well on their way to the new home of Buffalo Bill in the mysterious valley.

The wagon was soon overtaken, and afterward the herd, and Buffalo Bill said:

"Our new camp, pards, and to-morrow early we go into our new home."

The night halt was made, an early start followed the next morning, and before noon the cattle were halted upon the rich meadowland on either side the lake, several scouts left to guard them, while the rest rode on after their chief, who had gone on ahead to the hacienda.

"If that is not an owl's roost I'm mistaken," said one.

"And a coyote den," added another.

"It may be worse."

"How?"

"It may be an outlaws' retreat."

"Or worse than that."

"How can that be?"

"The place may be haunted."

Some laughed, some did not; others looked grave, and said nothing.

The superstitions of a few had been aroused.

But into the walled-in plaza rode the scouts, followed by the wagon, and there stood Buffalo Bill, but his left sleeve was stained with blood, his face had a bruise upon it, and he had the appearance of one who had been in a terrible struggle.

"But," he said, calmly, "make yourselves at home, boys, for I am master here."

#### CHAPTER X.

##### A STRUGGLE FOR LIFE.

As has been stated, Buffalo Bill rode on ahead to the old hacienda, when he came within a few miles of the place.

He told Texas Jack where to halt the cattle and horses, to have a guard of several men over them, and then come on with the others and the wagon and grown animals.

Meanwhile the Chief of Scouts cantered on alone to the hacienda.

As he approached it he saw that all appeared there as he had left it a month before.

To him it looked as though no one had visited the place, and he saw not even a skulking coyote.

This put him on his guard, for he knew that when he had visited the place first, many coyotes had run out.

When he followed the officer and young girl there, none were seen, they having frightened them away.

Now, having found none about, he at once concluded that some one had been there within the last few minutes.

So he was on his guard.

Leaving his horse in the grounds he entered the hacienda.

It was a large structure, one story in height, built of adobe, and in the centre was a square, tower-like structure, with a top that looked very much as though it had been built as a fort, for from it the whole space within the walls, several acres in area, could be swept by even revolvers in the hands of persons stationed there on the tower roof.

It commanded, too, a wide range with rifles, and that it was intended for a stronghold there was no doubt in the scout's mind.

There were some thirty rooms in the building, but, as the scout said:

"Three or four will do for us, and the owls and bats can have the others."

There was some furniture there, too, robes, chairs, and bedsteads, but of all else the place had been swept clean.

Selecting the room that was to be their quarters, and being glad to see that the place within the walls would readily hold all their horses and cattle in an emergency when the entrance was repaired, Buffalo Bill was passing out through a long and dimly lighted cor-

ridor, when he beheld before him what appeared to be two diamonds glimmering in the half darkness.

But he was not deceived, he had seen just such balls of fire often before in his eventful life, and he was as quick as a flash in dropping his hand upon a weapon in his belt.

It was his knife, and he had just time to draw it and raise the point, when, with a savage growl there sprung upon him a huge mountain lion.

The weight of the animal, the blow of the body, and being unable to fully prepare for the shock, hurled Buffalo Bill backward, and he fell against the rough wall with considerable force, bruising his face badly, while he also felt the teeth of the mad animal buried in his arm.

But he had gotten his knife on guard, and the long, sharp blade had cut into the heart of the lion, the force of the spring driving it to the hilt.

Half dazed by the fall against the wall and the blow of the huge body against him, Buffalo Bill yet recognized that he must cut, and once more he drove his knife deep in the shaggy hide.

But to his joy he recognized that there was no need of his doing more, for the animal upon him was a dead weight, the first knife thrust had entered his heart, and the teeth that had been driven into the scout's arm had not been closed upon it, for the mountain lion had sprung to a quick and sudden death, the keen blade catching, by an accident, just in the right spot to kill.

Throwing off the weight, Buffalo Bill arose to his feet.

Was it from the concussion that he had received that made strange forms appear before his eyes, or did he really behold a ghostly form, clad in white, at the end of the long, dark corridor, one arm pointing straight outward, the other down at the ground.

"I'll tackle you, too, for ghosts are more to my liking than mountain lions," said Buffalo Bill, grimly, and he rubbed his eyes to see that they were not deceiving him, and, drawing his revolver now, he rushed forward to grapple with this new foe.

But then, as he felt that it was no vision of the brain, but in reality a ghostly looking form, not fifty feet from him, he halted and called out in a voice that echoed through the corridor:

"Hands up, there, or I'll fire to kill!"

But the order was not obeyed, the form still standing mute, motionless, and pointing as before.

Instantly came a red flash from the scout's revolver, a sharp report rang through the hacienda, echoing a hundred times, and, blinded for a moment by the glare, as soon as he could accustom his eyes to the dim light again, Buffalo Bill looked and, to his surprise, saw that the white-robed form had disappeared.

#### CHAPTER XI.

##### WHAT WAS IT?

Buffalo Bill at once moved rapidly toward the spot where he had seen the white form.

Twice he fired his revolver as he approached to light up the scene.

But he saw nothing.

The rear of the corridor had no egress, only a window some eight feet from the door.

Upon either side were doors, full a dozen feet from the end of the corridor, but one of these was closed too securely to open, and the other was the one he had entered the long hall from and led into the rooms he had selected for himself and comrades to dwell in.

Not a particle of superstition had the scout, but here was a mystery he could not solve.

How had the mountain lion gotten into that corridor?

He had not entered by the door that he had, for that was closed, and locked on the other side.



He could not have come through the window, even had he been able to leap that high, for it was closed.

The other door was locked, or bound, on the other side, but to have come through that way it could only have been done with the aid of a human being.

There were three doors to each side of the long corridor, some seventy feet in length, and a large one in front, looking out on the plaza, and under shelter of a roof that ran across the front of the hacienda like a piazza.

Then there was the high window in the rear, raised and lowered by a rope at will.

All the doors, save the one the scout had entered by, were closed.

How, then, could the mountain lion have gotten into the corridor without human help, and who was the white-robed form at whom he had fired?

Lighting match after match, Buffalo Bill looked about him.

He could discover nothing to show how the lion and the white form had entered.

There lay the lion, dead.

The spectral visitant was gone.

And yet, he had aimed to kill, and he knew that he was not one to miss.

His hand seemed as firm as iron.

Going out of the door through which he had entered, the scout closed it behind him, and, leaving the building, walked out into the bright sunlight.

He felt that his head was turned and blinding, and he knew that the teeth of the mountain lion had sunk deep, though they had not crushed his arm.

His sleeve was wet with blood, and he was feeling weak and a little shaky.

But just as he was going to the brook to bathe his wounds, Texas Jack, Wild Winfield, and eight of the men came at a canter into the plaza.

They were startled at the appearance of their chief, but marveled when he told them so coolly to make themselves at home; that he was the master there.

They saw that there had been a death struggle, and he did not keep them waiting to know what it was.

"I have had a fight with a mountain lion I found in the hacienda, Jack, and killed him, fortunately before he did me much harm.

"Get my medicine case from my saddle, and you, Stevens, see just how badly he bit my arm, for you are the surgeon of the outfit."

"Yes, chief, answered Seward Stevens, who had gone to Texas to practice medicine, but had become infatuated with scouting and devoted himself to that wild life instead.

The chief's wound was soon seen, and the marks of the teeth of the animal were seen below and above.

"The clothing took off any poison the teeth might have caused, for, fortunately, you had on your buckskin jacket and heavy woolen shirt, chief.

"It is not as bad nearly as I would expect from the teeth of a mountain lion," said Seward Stevens, whom his comrades called "Doc."

"He must have been a small one," said Wild Winfield.

"No, he was large enough.

"I have him in the hacienda; but I saw the glitter of his eyes as he sprang, and just had time to get my knife ready, and he did the rest, for he drove it right into his heart.

"He was dead when he fell on top of me.

"But that is not all I found in the hacienda, boys."

"I see that your face is bruised and head cut," Doc Stevens said.

"That was done when I fell against the wall with the lion on top of me.

"Then I saw what I at first believed was conjured up by my half-dazed brain; but I fired at it, yet got no game."

"What was it, chief?"

"A ghost."

Some of the men looked startled at this announcement, while others laughed.

"Well, boys, I saw a human form, clad in white, and, as it did not obey my order to hands up, I fired.

"But I could find nothing when I looked for the dead body, for I am not one to miss my aim."

The words of the chief created an impression, for all knew that he was not in a joking humor.

## CHAPTER XII.

### THE CHIEF'S STORY.

"The truth is, pards," the chief of scouts went on to say:

"We are not wanted in this valley, and I will tell you why.

"I had no idea that there was such a settlement as this in this valley about this lode, and I wish to know if you had ever heard of it?"

"I have been through here before, ten years ago, and it surprised me then, chief, but I have met no one else who knew that there was a settlement here.

"Then its people were Mexicans, Indians, negroes, and a few Americans."

The one who spoke was Lone Star Sam, a handsome, dashing fellow, reserved, courteous, and whom his comrades regarded as a man with a past that had left its impress upon him, for he never spoke of the bygone.

"What did you find out more about it, Sam?"

"Very little, sir."

"What brought you here?"

"I was in search of one I was anxious to find, and, hearing of this settlement from a Mexican officer, I came here to see if my man was here."

"Was he?"

"He was not."

"Did you stay long at that time?"

"About a month, chief."

"Well, I found this way by accident, on my last trail south, when on my return, and I wish to tell you what I found out about the strange valley and its mysterious people.

"Thanks, Doc, you have made me feel all right, and certainly you are a good surgeon."

Then Buffalo Bill told his story, as he had to General Carr, and let the scouts understand what discovery he had made, and what Senor Otega, the ranchero down the valley had made known to him, though he did not say where he had gotten the information.

Continuing, he said:

"Now, boys, we are here to find out where these secret outlaws are.

"They are doubtless leagued for gold alone, but revenge may play a part in their actions also.

"That they have a retreat is assured by their keeping their captives as hostages.

"Where their retreat is we must find out.

"Who they are we must know, and when we have set our trap we must spring it in a way that will leave escape for none.

"A dozen there may be, perhaps more, to work so well and successfully.

"The landlord, Buriel is his name, I do not trust, so beware of him; yes, and every one else, even the Padre San Juan in Silver Sands, as he, too, may be a wolf in the garb of a sheep.

"Trust no one, but keep your eyes and ears open, and be prepared at any time to fight for your lives.

"I am, remember, an American ranchero, and you are my cattle men.

"We are here to stay, you can tell the inquisitive, and secretly we are here to ferret out the mysteries of this valley.

"The curse that rests upon it is a mystery, the secret band of robbers and kidnappers is another, my having met that Mexican officer and maiden is a third, while the masked man and his four unmasked followers is a fourth mystery.

"Then there is this deserted hacienda, and let me warn you that it has begun its underhand work already, for human hands led that mountain lion in where I found him, and the white-robed form I fired at was no apparition, and you are all too sensible for a moment to believe that such a thing could be.

"Now come up and see our quarters, and get the packs off the mules and unload the wagons, for I wish to get lanterns, and, first of all, make a thorough search of the old place.

"Where are the two wagon drivers?"

"Back with the men I left with the herd, for nothing would induce them to come any nearer to this hacienda, so one of the boys brought the wagon on, and when it is unloaded, will drive it back and let them skip, for they wish to be well on their way before night overtakes them, and swear they would not have come a step had the landlord told them where they were to take their load."

Buffalo Bill laughed at the fears of the two Mexicans who had come with the wagon, and Texas Jack went on to say:

"And chief, those two fellows vowed that there was not a man in the valley you could get to come to this hacienda, day or night."

"All right. We don't want any to come.

"But we are men, and here we remain until I accomplish what I came for.

"Now, boys, get to work, and as soon as you come to the lanterns, several of us will reconnoitre the hacienda thoroughly."

The lanterns were soon found, half a dozen in number, and, calling five of the men to accompany him, Buffalo Bill started off on a thorough reconnaissance of the old mission ranch.

## CHAPTER XIII.

### THE SEARCH.

The hacienda, as I have said, was very large, of a single story, save in the centre, where there was a second story, with a large tower above.

The windows had been covered over when the place had been deserted, and this, with its wings and rear extension, its chapel attached, and servants' quarters, rendered all dark and gloomy within.

The corridor was first entered through the wing the Chief of Scouts had selected for occupation, and it was seen that all save the door through which he had made his entrance and exit was securely fastened.

Whoever it had been the chief had fired at, could only have entered and retreated by that single door, as far as could be seen.

There lay the dead mountain lion, the scout's knife wounds in heart and back, and he proved to be of enormous size, and all saw that it had been most fortunate for the chief that he had caught him on his knife point just as he did.

The rear window was opened then, and showed that it had been closed for a long time.

So did the wide front doors, which filled almost the other end of the corridor.

But the other doors, save that one through which Buffalo Bill had entered, showed plainly that they had not been opened for a long while.

That door the chief himself had opened from within the wing, and yet the lion had been found in the corridor, as also had the white apparition, whatever it was.

"Well, if a mountain lion could get in here, a ghost ought to.

"The lion was certainly not a spectre brute, as I have proof of," said the chief, with a grim smile.

But a search of the walls, and even the ceiling over their heads, failed to reveal any other way of entering the corridor.



That was what puzzled the scouts, and Buffalo Bill said:

"Those of you who are superstitious, remember, please, that the mountain lion was here, and only human hands could bring him here, and so the pretended ghost can be accounted for in the same way, only the trick is too deep and well covered up for us to account for just now."

"We will now look over the rest of the building."

And they did so, going into each wing, the chapel, and the basement in the solid rock beneath it, the second story, and up to the tower.

This done, and nothing found more than that it had been the haunt of owls and bats, for many were put to flight, the party blew out their lanterns and returned to the wing where their comrades had been hard at work.

With water from the stream, and brooms, they had cleaned up the rooms well, a fire was built in the large open chimney, the tables gotten out, chairs set around, the cooking utensils put in the fireplace, the bedding placed in the sleeping rooms, and in little more than three hours the hacienda, in that wing at least, presented a very comfortable appearance.

Then the wagon was returned to the two waiting Mexicans, and the broken down entrance was repaired, as it was decided best, for a few nights at least, to drive the horses and cattle into the walled grounds about the hacienda, so that they would begin to understand that it was home.

Just before sunset the stock was driven up, and the gateway having just been finished, so as to make it strong again, it was closed for the night, and the scouts went to get supper.

Two guards were appointed for the night, one in the hacienda, one at the entrance to the grounds, and Buffalo Bill selected men whom he knew were not of a superstitious turn of mind, remarking to Texas Jack:

"If we put on the first night a man who was looking for ghosts, this is the very place to find them, and he would be alarming us constantly with challenges of apparitions, so I just put on men who have no fear of the dead."

"You are right, for though there is not a man in the band who would not fight big odds if he knew he was facing men, several of the boys would skip at the sight of anything in this ruin they did not understand."

"I am sorry that you told them the ghost story."

"No, it was best, for if this hacienda is the haunt of outlaws, as I believe it has been, it will be by springing the supernatural upon us that they will endeavor to frighten us away."

"Yes, that is so, and from that standpoint it was best; but the cleverness of that apparition act shows that they have some means of getting in and out that we are not on to yet, chief."

"Well, it won't be long before we are, if the men are not stampeded by a supposed ghost," was Buffalo Bill's answer.

#### CHAPTER XIV. SPOOKS ABROAD.

There was not a man in the whole band of Rough Riders whom Buffalo Bill particularly selected for his secret work in the Silver Sands Valley who would not have risked his life willingly for a comrade, and stood up and died by his side if necessary.

But superstition, inculcated wrongfully into our lives in earlier years, gains a hold that is not easily shaken off, and a few years ago those who were not superstitious were the exception.

In the band of braves, for such all of them were, congregated in the hacienda that night, about half of them had a superstitious dread of the old deserted mission ranch.

Several even were really feeling an undisguised fear of something happening that was uncanny and supernatural.

Buffalo Bill saw just how these men felt, and he read the faces of those who had no dread.

So he said, as all were seated in the ranch waiting to retire:

"Remember, pards, I believe that efforts will be made to drive us out of here to-night."

"Not by direct force, for, with our numbers and the men I know I have with me, I would not fear you to run from any foe."

"But this hacienda is very old. Strange deeds have been done here, crimes committed, and most mysterious happenings have occurred."

"Now, there is no such thing, as all of you know, as spooks and ghosts, for the dead never come back to earth in spirit form."

"But, relying upon the fears of many that so believe, wicked men play the ghost act and the supernatural to frighten all away from this place for a purpose of their own."

"My idea is that this place has been the abode of outlaws, and our coming here thwarts their game to keep hidden."

"As they dare not attack us openly, they will play the spectre game and try and stampede us."

"But that will not go with you, and as an extra precaution to-night I will keep four men on duty instead of two."

"Two of you can be together; a couple in the hacienda, the others about the grounds."

"But, remember, neither of the guards must move into the domains of the others, for my orders are to shoot everything on two legs you see prowling about, be it ghost or man."

"Now, Jack, you go on duty with three men until midnight, and I will relieve you then with three men."

This plain talk quieted the superstitious dread of those who had been feeling anxious as to what might happen, and Texas Jack went on duty with three men whom he called to follow him, being careful to select two or three whom he knew had an uncanny fear of the place.

One of them he left with a comrade who had no fear of ghosts on guard at the hacienda, and the others he took out in the grounds with him, though showing no sign that he suspected either.

The horses were huddled together in one corner of the walled-in plaza, and the cattle were in another, all quiet and apparently wondering why they were penned up.

As the guards left the hacienda the others turned in for the night, and were soon fast asleep, Buffalo Bill setting the good example by dropping off instantly into a deep slumber.

Soon after the guards had gone on duty, the horses began to grow uneasy, just why Texas Jack could not understand.

As they still continued their restlessness he told the man who was with him to stand guard at the gateway while he went among the restive animals.

But the man preferred to go with him, and he said no more.

The two quieted the horses, to find that the cattle were getting restive, also, and, cowboy fashion, Texas Jack began to sing to them, for, as he muttered to himself:

"If they stampede they may break out, and about half the nags will go with them."

The cattle also became quieted under the weird chanting of the Texan, and then the horses once more became restive.

"Say, Pinto Paul, you stay about the horses while I soothe the split-hoofs with the melody of my voice, which can

lull them to rest," said Texas Jack in a light vein.

"Jack, give me an order to tackle the mate of that mountain lion the chief killed, or to brace up against a couple of outlaws, and I'll do it, but just here let me remark that I follow close on your trail this night, and I'll sing with you to the cattle, or I'll prowl with you about among the horses, but don't you expect me to play a lone hand, for I don't intend to do it."

"You are surely not scared, Pinto Paul?"

"Yes, I am scared, for I don't like watching for spooks. I'm badly scared, and don't you forget it, Pard Jack."

"Now see these horses; they see what we don't see, and so do the cattle."

"I tell you that this is no place for living men when the dead are prowling about."

#### CHAPTER XV.

##### A CHANGE OF GUARDS.

Texas Jack saw that Pinto Paul was in deadly earnest, and he said no more, merely remarking:

"Well, Paul, if you think I am a foil to the ghosts we'll stay together, and we'll keep by the gate, so as to head the cattle if they make a break for it, and I'll keep up my song."

And so did the plaintive song of the Texan continue, and it did have a soothing effect upon both cattle and horses.\*

Thus the time passed away out in the grounds, while in the hacienda when all became quiet it seems that the spooks began to get in their work also.

The first the guards heard was a low, moaning sound.

It sounded like a man in suffering, but just where it came from the two guards could not tell.

The superstitious one of the two was for rousing the men at once, but his comrade said:

"What for?"

"We see no one, and it is merely a trick to frighten us, for the chief is right; this is an outlaws' haunt."

When there joined in with the moaning the sound of a woman weeping Mustang Frank began to show real fight, but Lone Star Sam calmed him, and the two listened to the strange sounds. As though a man's moaning and woman's weeping were not enough, there joined in as a treble the sound of a child crying like one in pain.

"My God, Lone Star, let us arouse the chief."

"No, Frank, it is nearly midnight, and he'll be on hand then."

"Besides we cannot shoot, mind."

"This place is haunted by men whose interest it is to frighten us away; but we won't scare a little bit, Frank."

"Speak for yourself, pard, for I'm about scared silly this blessed minute."

Lone Star Sam laughed, and then said:

"Listen!"

"I thought we would have more of it, for hear that dog join in the quartette, only I don't like the music—ah! here comes the chief."

Buffalo Bill just then came out into the corridor, Mustang Frank starting as the door opened.

"Well, pards, we are having a serenade, I hear."

"But it is time for you to turn in, just twelve, and I'll watch here, while Kearney Haskell stands by the outer door; but remain on duty until I return from seeing Texas Jack."

"Do you mean any one can sleep, chief, with this going on?"

"Yes, Mustang Frank."

"We were not born in the woods to be frightened by an owl," was the answer, and Buffalo Bill left the corridor and met Wild Winfield and the other two men who were to go on guard.

\*It is well known that the cowboys sing to their cattle at night, and certainly it does lull them into quiet.—The Author.



They were Kearney Haskell and Broncho Rawlings, and both of them were very nervous, for they had heard the weird sounds echoing through the hacienda.

"Winfield, you and the others come with me to where Texas Jack and Pinto Paul are on duty, and we will see if they have been disturbed by these outlaws playing ghost."

On they walked, and found Texas Jack having as much trouble to soothe Pinto Paul as he had to keep the cattle quiet.

"Anything wrong, Jack?"

"The cattle, and horses, too, are very restless, and Paul thinks ghosts are about, but we have seen nothing, though we have heard the howling of a dog and hooting of an owl."

"Well, Jack, I will relieve you and Pinto Paul, and Broncho Rawlings will stand guard over the cattle while I take the gate."

"You, Winfield, return to the hacienda and relieve Lone Star, taking Haskell with you."

This was done, Broncho Rawlings taking his stand among the cattle, and at once beginning to sing as Texas Jack had done, for they were, indeed, restless.

Wild Winfield and Haskell returned to the hacienda, accompanied by Texas Jack and Pinto Paul, who muttered:

"I suppose it will be out of the frying pan into the fire in that old ghost nest."

The men were all awake, now, yet not up.

But Texas Jack showed no dread, simply remarking that a ghost would be made of those in reality who were playing the spook act, and he turned in.

Pinto Paul, meanwhile, stirred up the fire, for light, not heat, and sat by it, merely remarking:

"Now, I'm not sleepy a little bit, pards."

Wild Winfield meanwhile had placed Kearney Haskell on guard at the outer door of the hacienda, while he went in to relieve Lone Star and Mustang Frank.

These came into the large sleeping room, and while Lone Star calmly went to bed, Mustang Frank joined Pinto Paul at the fire, remarking:

"I'm with you, pard, for I always was scared of a danger I couldn't see."

"Me, too."

"This old rookery is a graveyard from wayback, and, you bet, ghosts are on the prowl this night, for they've invited no company, and don't keep a hotel for men in the flesh."

"Just listen to that music, will you," and the weird sounds rang through the hacienda.

#### CHAPTER XVI.

##### AN ALARM.

When Buffalo Bill had gone into the corridor he had intended to relieve Lone Star and Mustang Frank himself, for the sounds were dismal enough, echoing through the old hacienda.

But when he visited the spot where Texas Jack was on guard he thought that the entrance to the ranch was the best place for him, after he had heard the Texan's report.

He knew if the cattle and horses were restless some one was causing them to be so by prowling about among them, and in some way exciting them.

If that "some one" could only stampede the whole lot, causing them to break through the gateway, then he and his scouts would be in a bad way indeed.

It was true that the gateway had been repaired, but not as well as was intended, for timber would have to be cut and hauled there to make it secure, and a rush of steers would now break down the barrier that was there.

That any other demonstration would be made in the hacienda than the weird sounds already heard, Buffalo Bill did not believe, so he decided that he would

keep his stand at the gate and let Broncho Rawlings guard the cattle, singing to them to keep them quiet.

The moment the others had walked away, Buffalo Bill had quickly crouched down in the shadow of the wall, just at the entrance.

He heard no sound save the impatient tramping of the horses, the singing of Broncho Rawlings, and an anxious lowing of a frightened steer.

Then an hour passed, and the Chief of Scouts muttered:

"It's time, now, for graveyards to yawn, if ever."

He had hardly uttered the words when he saw that the horses were becoming more restless.

He would not call to them, but kept quiet.

A moment after his keen eyes detected a white object running along the wall.

It came from the corner where the horses were.

Keeping his position, Buffalo Bill watched the white object, as he could distinctly see it.

The song of Broncho Rawlings was still kept up, and the cattle, too, became more restive in spite of the lulling notes of melody, for the singing scout had a most melodious voice.

"Broncho soothes them, but if I attempted to sing to them I'd stampede the whole outfit, yes, scouts and all," said Buffalo Bill, with a full realization that music was not one of his accomplishments.

But the weird form he had seen?

It was still creeping toward the gate.

The Chief of Scouts was upon the opposite side, crouching in the shadow of the massive adobe column on either side of the entrance.

The white figure came straight toward him, and had Pinto Paul been where Buffalo Bill was, he would have stampeded with alacrity.

The white figure did not seem to be able to see well, for the scout had not been discovered yet.

Halting at the entrance, not twenty feet from Buffalo Bill, the "ghost" showed what its intention was.

It intended to break down the barrier, and thus leave an open way for the cattle to stampede.

But the entrance had been better closed than the midnight prowler in white thought, as it had some difficulty in its attempt.

But just then there came from the hacienda, rising far above the singing of Broncho Rawlings and all other sounds, wild and piercing shrieks.

The ghost seemed determined to break down the barrier as he heard the sound, but was suddenly startled by the stern command:

"Hands up, there, or I'll fire!"

A cry broke from the white-robed form, and, with a bound, he was off, when sharp, loud, and deadly came the report of a revolver.

Just as Buffalo Bill pulled the trigger it seemed as though the white form fell heavily, and then Buffalo Bill's voice was heard:

"Turn out, all, to quiet the cattle."

Out of the hacienda came Texas Jack and the others, while, springing before the entrance, Buffalo Bill called out, soothingly, to the cattle, who begun to crowd there, the other scouts doing the same as they came out.

There was a moment of suspense, but then the herd calmed down as all the scouts, thoroughly trained as cattlemen, begun to sing to them.

Then Texas Jack went to aid Buffalo Bill, calling out as he advanced:

"Wild Winfield stands guard with several men in the hacienda, and I came to see who fired that shot, chief."

"I did."

"There is a dead ghost lying yonder, and I hope it will end this superstitious dread of the scouts," was Buffalo Bill's reply.

#### CHAPTER XVII.

##### "THE GHOST."

Texas Jack, seeing that the cattle were being quieted by the scouts, walked toward the white object lying thirty feet away, at the foot of the high adobe wall.

"Well, Jack, it's a flesh ghost, isn't it?" called out Buffalo Bill, as he saw his pard bend over it.

"It is."

"I'll call several of the men to guard the gate while we carry it up to the hacienda to have a look at it."

"Do so."

Several men at once came at the call, among them Pinto Paul.

"There's the ghost, Paul; at least, he is more ghost now than he was a short while ago," said Texas Jack.

"What is it?" he asked, in an awed way.

"A dead man."

"Who killed him?"

"The chief."

"That was your shot, sir?"

"Yes, Pinto."

"You fired at a man?"

"No, at a ghost."

"What is it?"

"A dead man, now, who was playing ghost awhile since."

"He did not know that I was on duty at the gate, here, for he heard Broncho Rawlings singing, and supposed he was alone on duty."

"As the ghost was trying to take down the barrier, to let the cattle out, I held him up, but, as he did not heed, I fired on him."

"I did not fire to kill, but to wing him, but just as I pulled trigger he fell into a hole I remember is there, and caught the bullet in a vital spot."

"But it shows that spirits can be killed, Pinto."

The scout made no reply, for he was beginning to see that if the hacienda was haunted, it must be by flesh and blood impersonations of ghostly forms.

"I'll give you a hand, Jack," said Buffalo Bill.

But the Texan dragged the white figure out of the gully into which he had fallen, and shouldered it without an effort.

As he moved off toward the hacienda Buffalo Bill joined him, calling out to the scouts to keep the cattle quiet, while he went to investigate the ghost in the glare of the light.

Arriving at the hacienda, Texas Jack deposited his load before the fire, and lighted a couple of lanterns, while Buffalo Bill walked to the corridor where Wild Winfield was on guard.

"Well, Winfield, how goes it?"

"All quiet, now, sir; but that shrieking was a blood curdler, even to me, and I feared it would stampede some of the boys along with the cattle."

"No, we headed them off."

"But keep your ears open for the slightest sounds, now, though I do not believe we will have any more disturbances."

"The ghost is laid, I think," and Buffalo Bill returned to the large room.

The fire had been brightened up, and, with the light of several lanterns, the room was very bright.

Texas Jack had laid the form upon the floor before the fire, and, with a couple of the men who had come in, was standing looking at it.

It was clad in a white garment, made to resemble a shroud, and the head was also wrapped around, though two holes had been made for the eyes to peer through.

On each side, near the belt, there were two slits, through which the hands could be thrust.

The white covering was taken from the form by Buffalo Bill and Texas Jack, and a dark, foreign face was exposed.

"It is a Mexican," said Texas Jack.

"Yes, and he came to kill, if need be," and Buffalo Bill pointed to the belt of arms the man wore.



He was attired half in Mexican, half in frontier garb, and his face was an evil one.

Also, about his waist was a buckskin belt that contained several hundred dollars in gold.

"Well, Jack, we need not report the killing of this man, at least just yet.

"We will wait and see if we hear of it, and, if so, the man who makes it known we will spot.

"I trust, now, the boys will not fear ghosts any more."

"I hope not, chief."

"Send each one of them here to have a look for himself, and they will know that I was right when I said an effort would be made to scare us away from here.

"As we did not scare, they will try some other plan to get rid of us; but, one thing is certain, that these men have some way of entering and leaving the hacienda we do not know of, but must find out.

"You see, there is not a sound, now, for they know that one of their spirits has come to grief."

Texas Jack went out after the men, and they all took a look at the "ghost," made their comments, saw where the bullet of the chief had struck him in the head, and then the body was put in a vacant room, a guard placed in the grounds, at the gate, and the rest of the scouts returned to their blankets, Pinto Paul remarking:

"Well, I take no more stock in ghosts, though I don't just love this old owl's nest."

#### CHAPTER XVIII.

##### BUFFALO BILL MAKES A VISIT.

The night passed away without much sleep for a few of the scouts.

There was not another sound heard in the hacienda, and the horses and cattle quieted down.

This proved to the men that they had been frightened by the white-robed form going about among them.

The body of the dead Mexican was buried by some of the scouts, off to itself in the walled enclosure, while the others prepared breakfast and put things to rights.

After the meal was over Wild Winfield and six of the scouts went out with the cattle to graze, while Texas Jack and the others started upon a thorough search of the old mission ranch.

They were anxious to find out just where their disturbers of the night before had hidden, or, if not concealed in the place, how they had gotten into it and made their exit.

Having posted men here and there on the watch, one in the tower, one upstairs, one in the grounds, and seen the others start in the search, Buffalo Bill put on his best rig and rode away, his men wondering where, and why he had dressed up.

He rode his best horse, carried a rifle slung to the centre of his saddle, and seemed prepared to meet friend or foe.

That he carried no provisions along, after saying that he would not return until night, was also a surprise to the scouts, who knew that their chief was not one to miss a meal except on compulsion.

Down the valley rode the scout, and, following the lake shore its length, he turned, after going half a score miles, into a trail leading to the left toward the mountain range on the eastward.

Up among the foothills he saw a fine hacienda which he knew was the place where he had spent the night in passing through the valley a month before.

Toward this he wended his way, for he wished to talk with Senor Otega.

The senor it was who had told him of the secret band of robbers in the valley, of the curse that rested upon the people, and this had influenced him in coming there with his rough riders to solve the mystery, to hunt down the outlaws.

He did not care to trust even Senor Otega with any secrets, for he knew not who he could place confidence in; but, being now come to the valley, being on the spot, he might find out from the senor some information that might be of value to him.

At least he would make the attempt to do so without compromising himself.

He wished to see just who the maiden he had rescued was, who the band of five outlaws might be, when Senor Otega had said that not one of the secret foes of the people in the valley had ever been seen.

Then who was the officer in the Mexican uniform, and why was he in the valley thus attired, why the victim of those five men?

It was to get at the bottom facts, as well as he could, that Buffalo Bill had started upon his visit to Senor Otega.

As he neared the ranch he saw the cattle and horses feeding near, the cowboys, five in number, guarding them and gazing curiously at him, and to these he nodded as he rode near and said, pleasantly:

"Good morning, pard."

They returned his salute in silence, and were evidently surprised at seeing a stranger.

Going on up to the hacienda he saw Senor Otega just about to mount his horse, but, discovering him, he turned toward him and said:

"Why, senor, you in our valley again?"

"You are welcome, I assure you."

Buffalo Bill responded to the question, and then said:

"But my coming prevents you from going on a ride, I fear?"

"No, for I can go another time, as there is no great hurry.

"I was merely intending to ride over to see the stranger who has taken possession of the old mission ranch and urge that he give up such a thought, for I deemed it my duty to advise him."

"Thanks, senor."

"Do you know who he is?"

"An American of wealth, I believe, who came here with his people, cattle, horses, and all.

"Permit me to say, senor, that I am the one."

"You, Senor Cody?"

"Yes, I took possession yesterday."

"You surprise me."

"And it is a surprise to me that you should know it so soon."

"I learned it last night from my men."

"But, senor, I am the more distressed, now, as I learn you are the man, for I like you, senor, and to go to that terrible place is but to go to your doom."

"Not so bad as that, I hope, Senor Otega."

"The fact is, I fell in love with your beautiful valley, and, anxious to find a home, I decided to settle here, and the old hacienda was the only place I could get."

"So I came here from the northwest, bringing my cattle, horses, outfit, and cowboys with me, and I assure you we shall be most comfortable.

"You see I took an early opportunity to call upon you."

But the Senor Otega seemed to be lost in thought and said, in an absent-minded way:

"Come in, come in!"

#### CHAPTER XIX.

##### GLEANING FACTS.

Buffalo Bill followed Senor Otega into the hacienda and took the seat placed for him.

Then the senor stood just in front of his guest and said, impressively:

"Why did you come to this valley, senor?"

"To settle here, at least for a while."

"You have your people with you?"

"Yes."

"A wife and children?"

"Oh, no, my wife is in Leavenworth, Kansas, our home, and I have only a little girl."

"Thank God!"

"They will not come here, then?"

"Oh, no."

"Those with you are men?"

"Yes, all of them, and real men, too."

"I am glad."

"But why did you seek a home beneath that doomed roof?"

"Do you remember telling me the curse that rested upon this valley?"

"Yes, oh, yes."

"You told me that your daughter had been taken from you by an unseen foe."

"Yes."

"Has she been restored to you?"

"Alas! no."

"She is still a prisoner?"

"Yes."

"And, senor, only yesterday I paid the tax of one thousand pesos put upon me."

"It is an outrage."

"It is the seventh I have paid, senor, and I believe there are to be five more, if not still more, before she is returned to us."

"And other families pay this same tax?"

"Yes, senor."

"How many?"

"I should say nearly a hundred."

"It is infamous."

"But they do not all pay the same sum, senor, for the tax gatherer knows well the circumstances of each of his victims, and collects accordingly.

"He does not put upon any one a sum that cannot be paid, for when I pay a thousand, a poor man pays five hundred, another a hundred, and two others in the valley even more than I do, for one pays five thousand pesos, senor."

"Who is that?"

"A young girl, the Senorita Consuelo Caliente, known as the Fair Hermit."

"Ah! who did you say she was?"

"One left a large fortune by a kinsman, who owned the ranch where she lives, and she came here to dwell, but receives no visitors, has no friendships, and lives such a life of utter seclusion we call her here in the valley the Hermitess of the Hacienda, the Fair Hermit, the Beautiful Recluse, and other names."

"Who of her family are with her?"

"Not one."

"Does she dwell all alone?"

"All alone, senor, save her servants and cattlemen, of whom there are quite a number, but they, too, hold themselves aloof from all others, and the stock men are known as the Hermit Cowboys."

"Then how can these secret tax gatherers, as we may call them, make a demand upon the Senorita Caliente for so large a sum, as they cannot have any of her loved ones, senor?"

"Ah, but they have."

"She is betrothed to a Mexican officer, I hear, and he came here on a visit to her, was seized on his way home, and is now held a prisoner by these men whom no one knows."

"When was this, senor?"

"About half a year, or more, ago."

"And he did not escape them?"

"No, senor, for I learn the demand is made upon her regularly for five thousand pesos, and she pays it."

"Is the officer a man of any prominence?"

"He is a Captain of Lanceros, senor, in the Mexican Army."

"It is strange that his Government has taken no steps to release him."

"There is a threat to put him to death if such an attempt is made."

"And he has been a prisoner for six months, you say?"

"A little more, perhaps."

Buffalo Bill did not tell what he had expected to about his rescue of the Fair Hermit.

He merely asked:

"You have not heard of this Mexican captain's escape?"

"No, senor."

"He might have done so, though."

"Oh, no, for the Fair Recluse still pays the ransom money."



"Do you know his name, senor?"  
 "It is said to be Del Sol Delano."  
 "You know the padre in Silver Sands City?"

"Oh, yes, Padre San Juan."  
 "Can he do nothing to help you people?"  
 "He is under a ban, also, a threat, if he does."

"And the landlord of the inn?"  
 "The Senor Buriel?"  
 "Senor Cody, I do not like that man, I do not trust him, though he, too, is under the ban, as his son, an only child, is a prisoner."

"Still, I have a dread of him."  
 "Well, Senor Otega, the secret foe can only capture me, or one of my men, to get ransom, and we'll watch that they do not."

"I did not come here to pay ransom to robbers; but I came here to settle, and I like our home, haunted though it may be by cruel memories."

"I told you that I intended to help you, and I am here to do so; but, remember, not a word of that to any one, for it might thwart my plan."

"I will be silent, senor, for something tells me you are here for good, to be relied on."

"I was going over to the old Mission Ranch to warn whoever had settled there to leave, for I did not know it was you."

"Are you sure nothing disturbed you last night?"

"We heard sounds, the cattle were restless, but no harm befel us, senor, and we'll take chances, for that is what we are here for."

"How many men have you, senor?"

"I thought it best to bring at least half a dozen," was Buffalo Bill's evasive reply, for he did not wish his force known, even to Senor Otega. He had not allowed the two Mexicans who drove the wagon from Silver Sands City to see but six men besides himself, keeping the others off beyond the cattle.

"It will be best to have just double the number they think I have," was the chief of scout's way of thinking.

## CHAPTER XX.

### KIDNAPPED.

Buffalo Bill remained to dinner at the hospitable ranch of Senor Otega, and the senora, a sad-faced, lonely woman, gave him a warm greeting, for she had been much pleased with his frank and genial manner upon his last visit to their home.

Late in the afternoon the scout started upon his return, the senor accompanying him a few miles on the trail.

Learning that he had just moved in, the Senora Otega insisted that she be allowed to add to his comfort, and when he was ready to go he found a pack horse ready for him to carry along, and it had been loaded with grapes, preserves, and a large quantity of choice provisions, which the good lady insisted that he must accept from her, and added:

"Just turn your horse loose to-night, and he will come home and give you no further trouble."

The scout was touched by the Senora Otega's kindness, and as he rode away with her husband, he said:

"You told your wife, then, that I was here to help you?"

"Not a word, senor; but I told her when you left a month ago that you were Buffalo Bill, the great military scout, and had promised to be our friend; and, with a woman's quick intuition where her love is interested, she feels sure that you have come to save our poor Lulita, our daughter."

"Yes, I saw that she was trying to read me, and I appreciate her kind gifts to make me comfortable."

"We will enjoy her bounty greatly."

As they reached the lake shore the sun was touching the horizon, and the senor halted and said:

"I will turn back here, senor, for my wife will be anxious."

"You see, we have lately received

quite a handsome legacy, and if it were known, then our secret foes would capture me or my wife, and demand a much larger ransom, you see."

"Then return home at once, and I regret that you came thus far with me."

"You have the most dangerous trail to travel, Senor Cody, and a long ten miles."

"I am used to dangerous trails, senor, but if I thought danger might beset you I would return with you."

"Not unless you remain all night, senor."

"I could not do that."

"The ghost in the old hacienda might put my men to flight."

The sun had now sunk behind the western range of mountains, and the lake valley was already darkening under the fall of night.

So the scout bade the senor good-night, and the two went their separate ways.

"That man is all right, for he told me of his legacy lately received."

"I came here prepared to doubt every one, but I'll set him down as a square man," muttered Buffalo Bill as he rode along the lake shore, under the shelter of the fringe of timber, beneath which led the trail up the valley.

Senor Luis Otega turned his horse toward home, and set out at a rapid canter.

But he began to think, and his horse came down to a walk unheeded.

Reaching a belt of timber, the animal was walking along at his ease, the night having set in, when, without a warning, there settled over the senor's head a coil of rope, and he found his arms pinioned to his side, while he heard the words, in Spanish:

"Resist, and you are a dead man, Senor Otega."

"I have men here to master you."

Senor Otega thought first of his wife, and he groaned in agony of spirit, but said, boldly:

"What does this outrage upon me mean, for you call me by name, and hence know me?"

"It means that you are a prisoner of the Silk Lasso Sharps, and the Senora Otega will be taxed to keep you alive," was the reply.

Senor Otega now, to his chagrin, saw that there was not one enemy in sight.

He had been lassoed by one man, and he had seized his bridle rein and stood by him, with a revolver leveled at his head.

If there were others about, he did not see any sign of them.

For a moment he thought of resistance, and so determined to engage the man in conversation, catch him off his guard, and then make a fight for his freedom.

He must take the chances of there being others in hiding.

If there were others, why did they not show themselves?

There was no reason why they should not.

He remembered that all the captures made had been supposed to have been accomplished with the lasso, and when word was placarded on a hacienda to notify the family that one of their number had been kidnapped and a ransom would be demanded, a tiny silk lasso had been also hung up with the notice, and this had given the kidnappers the name of the Silk Lasso Sharps.

What a grand thing it would be, thought the senor, if he could capture his captor alive, and thus get at the truth of who their secret foes were.

But as he spoke to the man there came a flash, a report, and the kidnapper sank in his tracks by the side of the senor's horse.

## CHAPTER XXI.

### THE SHOT IN THE DARK.

Senor Luis Otega was as much startled by the shot in the dark as the man who had captured him, had he known about it.

But the latter did not know about it. The bullet had cut through his brain so quickly he had not known what killed him.

The horse of Senor Otega was startled, and bounded forward.

At first thought Senor Otega had believed that he had been the one shot at, and as his horse set a good example of flight, he determined to encourage him in it, believing there were other outlaws about. His half-formed idea of resistance had been suspected, and hence he had been fired on, with a result that the wrong man had been killed.

But ere the horse had made half a dozen bounds, a voice called out:

"Ho, senor, I fired that shot!"

Senor Otega recognized the voice at once.

It had a ring in it that once heard could not be forgotten.

So he wheeled his horse, and rode back to find the one who had rescued him standing by the side of the fallen outlaw.

"Senor Cody!"

"Yes. I had a dread that your coming with me as far as you did might get you into trouble, so I turned back to dog your steps, unseen by you, and see you enter your ranch in safety."

"How glad am I that you did, senor," and the voice of the ranchero trembled with emotion.

"I was not very far behind you, nearer to you than I thought, for you must have slackened your speed, and I distinctly heard the voice of your captor."

"Instantly I sprang from my saddle, and, advancing on foot, realized that you had been captured, and I saw one man, but took the chances of there being more."

"As it was very dark here in the timber, I concluded to drop him, and not demand his surrender, for he might leap to cover, and if there were more, we would be at a discount, while they might kill you."

"As he was an outlaw, I thought it best to put him out of the way."

"That is the story of my being here, Senor Otega."

"God bless you," was all the ranchero could at first say.

But he soon conquered his emotion and told just what his captor had said to him.

Buffalo Bill listened attentively, and then said, abruptly:

"Senor Otega!"

"Yes, my friend."

"This man was sent to kidnap you."

"Yes."

"He is alone."

"Yes."

"His being here shows that he saw you leave your home, was watching your return, shadowing you, in fact."

"No doubt of it, senor."

"Well, I wish you to be guided by me in this matter."

"I will."

"Say nothing, even to your wife, of this attack on you to-night."

"I don't understand."

"I mean that no one must know of this attack on you, senor."

"But why, Senor Cody?"

"I'll tell you."

"This man was sent to do this work."

"True."

"If he does not return to report, they will not know what has become of him, for I shall strap his body upon his horse, which must be near, take the animal to the lake, lead him in, and thence along the shore in the water to a spot near my ranch."

"Yes, senor."

"I will search the body for any tell-tale articles there may be on it, and will hide away his saddle and bridle."

"But the horse, senor?"

"I will give him into the keeping of my men for a day, and after they have branded him and disguised him, his own master, if alive, would not know him, and one of them will ride him, so



he will not go back to his home, at least not just now."

"You know what you are about, Senor Cody."

"I hope so."

"Now we will find that horse, mount his master on him, and I'll lead him back through the timber, not in the trail."

"And your horse, senor?"

"Is trained, senor, and will keep always in the trail as I start him until we reach the lake shore, and there I will mount him."

"What will this dead man's comrades think?"

"In my opinion they will track him, find his trail leading here, then back to the lake, where they will lose it."

"They will see that your horse was halted here, remained for some time, and the tracks will reveal that two men were here, their comrade and you. They will take my footprints for yours, as you must not dismount."

"But when I have removed the body, you must move your horse about all over the spot, to mark out all traces of where it lay, for the ground is soft, I notice, beneath my feet."

"Then you go on homeward, and continue in a gallop until you get there."

"But that will not explain that dead man's absence."

"Yes, for they will believe that, being alone when he captured you, why you simply bribed him to let you go."

"Ah, senor!"

"That you bought your freedom, in fact, and thus tempted, he fell, and then made his escape."

"Senor, you are the man to track down this mystery that rests upon our fair valley."

"I will be guided by you in everything."

"And let me advise, as the story of your legacy is known, that you keep within your ranch, for they will seek to capture you again."

"I will, senor; I will," was the fervent response of the ranchero, whose admiration for the scout was increasing a hundredfold.

## CHAPTER XXII.

### THE CHIEF'S RETURN.

Going into the timber, Buffalo Bill was not long in finding the horse of the outlaw.

He was hitched a hundred yards away.

Mounting him, Buffalo Bill rode him back into the trail, the body of the dead kidnapper was tied across the saddle with his own lariat, and then the animal and that of the Senor Otega were moved all about, until every trace of where the man had fallen had been destroyed.

This a lighted match revealed, as it did also that there was not a bloodstain upon the ground.

Bidding the senor good-night, and promising to pay him another visit in good time, Buffalo Bill walked back to his own horse and the pack animal, turned the head of his horse toward the old ranch, threw the rein of the other over the saddle horn, and started them off at a walk.

He knew his faithful steed would lead the other one.

Then he returned to the kidnapper's horse, and led him through the timber, and then on back over the two miles to the lake shore.

There he overtook his horse and the pack animal, and they were taken into the lake, but at different points.

Along the beach, ankle deep in the lake, they continued their way, over the miles that lay between the point where they had entered the water and the old Mission Ranch.

At last the scout left the lake at a place where his trail led direct to the hacienda.

He saw the glimmer of a light there, and he knew that it must be at the gate and placed as a beacon to guide him home.

Not a horse or a steer did he see, and he felt that they had all been driven into the grounds again for safety.

As he neared the gate, the cheery voice of Texas Jack called out:

"Is that you, chief?"

"Yes, Jack."

"We were getting anxious about you, and not one of the men has retired."

"What, more ghosts?"

"Not the shadow of one, but the men wished to remain up to see if you came in all right."

"Oh, yes, I am all right. But I have a pack animal loaded with good things, for I have been off on a visit, and, Jack, I have another horse here, with his dead master upon him."

"Now, walls have ears, they say, and for fear the old hacienda may have some secret closets where foes are watching, I do not wish the men to breathe a word of this dead man."

"First he must be searched, then buried to-night in the grave with the other one, and his horse must be disguised."

"I understand, chief."

"In the morning drive the cattle and horses over my trail to the lake, to destroy the trail of this horse."

"Yes, chief."

Feeling that he could leave all to Texas Jack, Buffalo Bill dismounted and entered the walled-in grounds, discovering that the men had during the day made a barrier that nothing could break through.

Then he went on to the hacienda, for he was both tired and hungry.

The men welcomed their chief in a way that showed how glad they were to see him back, and that they felt a most warm regard for him.

But he said nothing of his adventure other than to tell them to go out and see Texas Jack.

Buffalo Bill had no desire to say anything in the hacienda that other ears than those his words were intended for should hear.

He was very suspicious about the old structure, for, though it seemed one could discover if there were secret closets about it, he very well knew that such had not been found out, and they were certainly there.

This was proven by the mountain lion being in the corridor, the sounds of moaning and weeping, and the howling of a dog the night before.

Those sounds could only have been made by persons in concealment.

The scouts had discussed the matter among themselves when out of the place and off from it, for the chief had warned them about talking when in the hacienda, and, where they could understand that men could have uttered the moans and other sounds, they could not comprehend just how the weeping of a woman and the voice of a child could have been heard.

Going out to Texas Jack, they saw the dead body, and it was quietly buried; then they took the horse in hand, and soon had him cleverly metamorphosed.

The saddle and bridle were taken into the hacienda and hidden, and all were told that they must not utter a word within the house that they did not wish to be known, as there might be eavesdroppers whom they did not wish to know their plans.

This all attended to, Texas Jack went up to the hacienda to report, and that also he had what had been taken from the dead man put away for inspection on the morrow.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

### SEALED LIPS.

There was a guard of four men that night, two in the hacienda, two in the grounds.

Soon after midnight Buffalo Bill was awakened by low groans.

Where they came from he could not tell.

He arose in the darkness, and tried to trace the sound to its source.

But in vain.

Lone Star was on guard in the corridor, but he, too, knew not whence they came.

Then followed the sound of weeping in a woman's voice, as upon the night before.

"Go, Lone Star, and see if there is any disturbance among the cattle."

"I will keep watch until you return," said Buffalo Bill.

Lone Star left, and the chief took his stand just in the middle of the corridor, and listened attentively.

As he listened there was heard the wailing of a child, as though in pain.

And the moans, the weeping, and the wailing continued.

"It all comes from the centre of this hacienda, either from overhead or from underneath, which I cannot tell," mused the scout.

Suddenly there rang out the wild, piercing shriek of the night before.

For a moment Buffalo Bill was startled, so close to him did it seem.

The men were all awakened by it, and upon their feet in an instant.

There was an alarm sounded, but just then Lone Star returned, and reported the horses and cattle quiet.

"Yes, and the same game must be played here to quiet these ghosts," said Buffalo Bill.

Lone Star had heard the shriek, for it had even reached the men on guard at the gate.

He said every scout was up and ready for business.

"This must not be," Buffalo Bill muttered.

"They must pay no attention to any sounds they hear, and then we will master the situation."

This order was given secretly to each one of the men, and they returned to their beds, though some did not care to sleep, as that unearthly shriek still echoed in their ears.

The morning dawned, and then Buffalo Bill gave orders to each man to retire the next night early, and to pay no attention to moans, groans, weeping, wailing, or shrieks.

"We will disappoint them, pards."

"And more, only one man need stand guard to-night in the hacienda, and one at the gate."

"If there is cause for alarm a pistol shot will be the signal to bring us to the spot where we are needed, but, remember, nothing less than seeing a ghost to-night counts, for hearing them is nothing."

These orders were given away from the hacienda, where no one could hear, if concealed within the walls.

The men to guard the cattle left early with the herd and the horses, and the trail of Buffalo Bill's horse and the led animals was blotted out to the lake.

One of the men even rode the horse of the dead kidnapper out on duty.

His heavy tail had been thinned out more than one-half, as also had his bushy main, while two brands had been put upon him that looked old.

This was done by folding a cloth, saturating it in water, placing it upon the side of the animal, and then holding the red-hot brand against it until the hair was scalded off, but the flesh not burnt.

This gave it an old look, and the horse certainly would not be known by the man who had owned him.

When breakfast was over Buffalo Bill went with Texas Jack down to the adobe lodge at one side of the gateway.

Here was where the Texan had placed the things taken from the dead body of the kidnapper.

Lone Star Sam was also there, by order of Buffalo Bill, and Texas Jack said:

"Here are his weapons, and they are good ones, and his saddle and bridle I have put in hiding."

"This belt of gold I took from the body also, and it appears to be heavy."

"He was buried in the grave of the ghost you shot last night, chief, so no



other mound appears to any one who might be watching from a secret hiding place in the hacienda.

"Here also are some things of interest, for this is a small silk lariat, a miniature one, as it were, with a pin in it, and it was rolled up in this paper."

The scout took the paper. There were pins in the four ends, ready for use.

Aloud he read what was written on the paper in red ink, and which was as follows:

**"WARNING!"**

"The Senora Otega is informed that her husband was kidnapped last night by the Secret Foes of Silver Sands, and that he will be held in safety in comfort in their keeping until a certain sum in ransom, payable monthly, is in their hands.

"This sum the Senora Otega will pay as she does the ransom of her daughter, and it will be Two Thousand Pesos per month.

"By command of the chief of  
The Silk Lasso Sharps."

"Well, this was intended to be stuck up on the gate to the Otega Ranch, pards, only the little plot miscarried, and the senor is safe at his home, I am glad to say.

"The man you buried last night, and the one I killed the night before prowling about as a ghost, are both members of this band of Secret Foes, the one we have come here to wipe out.

"Unfortunately, they were both killed, and their lips were sealed.

"But the next chance we get, let the boys all understand they must fire to capture, not kill, and maybe we can force the secret from a prisoner, when he believes his life is in danger.

"Now I shall make a thorough search of the hacienda, and you take care of those things, paper, silk lasso, and all, Jack," and with Lone Star, the chief returned to look the old ranch over thoroughly.

**CHAPTER XXIV.**

**FOILED.**

Buffalo Bill and Lone Star began their work in a most systematic manner to try and unearth the hiding place of whoever it was that created the midnight disturbances in the hacienda.

The ghost playing in the grounds had apparently been put an end to by the shot of the Chief of Scouts.

They dared not risk their lives, whoever they were, with a man who did not believe in the supernatural, and there were evidently some of the scouts who were not to be frightened by alleged apparitions, though, again, a few might be.

Commencing with the wing selected for their living quarters, Buffalo Bill went inside and out, taking in the shape of the walls, the space in the roof, and all.

They hammered on the walls for hollow places, and tried all they could to see if they could find an inner space where a man could hide, or a narrow passageway ran.

From the living wing they went to the centre, and this same plan was followed there.

The staircase leading to the floor above went up in the centre of the corridor, and landed in a square hallway, into which two rooms opened, one in front, one in the rear, and a door on each side led out to the roof of the whole structure, ending at the chapel in one wing.

A stairway also led from the square hall referred to up to the tower, where the roof was flat, as was the case below, and the whole arose several feet high, forming an adobe breastwork to fight behind.

There was space up there for a score of men, and it commanded the grounds thoroughly, for the chapel walls formed the end of the structure for a part of the way on the left.

Behind the hacienda there was a large

yard, several acres in size, as in front, and it, too, was walled in.

The wall ran back to a cliff, with a space between it and the rugged range, and the gateway there was securely closed up.

"The house proper, Sam, is about 500 feet from that cliff, and it is not too far to have an underground passageway into the hacienda, and if so we must find the opening," said Buffalo Bill.

"If we can, chief; and if not, we will look for the coming in place out on the cliff."

"Yes.

"But now to the chapel wing, for we have certainly thoroughly searched all the rest."

"And been foiled thus far."

"We have.

"Yet we know that these fellows have a getting-in place."

So the two descended to the first floor again, and passed through the left wing into the chapel, and what had evidently been the office and living room of the ladies who had held sway there long before.

The walls were examined here, as they had been elsewhere, and then the cellar of the chapel was entered, the two scouts carrying lanterns.

But not an opening, or what looked even like a concealed door, was to be found anywhere.

All was apparently solid, and the call to dinner came, and the thorough search ended without the slightest discovery being made to show how the outlaws found entrance to the hacienda to play ghost at night.

"We'll try the cliff now, Sam, and take Wild Winfield and Kit Kingdon with us," said Buffalo Bill.

They left by the rear entrance, scaling the wall, as they did not care to take down the barrier in the rear gateway.

The four men found themselves against a cliff that they could not scale, as far as they could see, upon either side.

So they divided their force, two going each way.

Buffalo Bill and Kit Kingdon, after a walk of several hundred yards, found a place where they could ascend by the aid of the stunted trees that grew up the face of the cliff.

With some little difficulty they gained the top, and found it a rugged plateau, covered with timber.

It was a space a quarter of a mile in width, jutting out from the main range half a mile back.

They walked toward the front, to have a look down upon the hacienda, and beheld Wild Winfield and Lone Star Sam far away toward the range, and returning, having found no place to scale the steep sides of the spur.

Calling to them, Buffalo Bill told them how to get up, and in half an hour the four were upon the cliff.

A grand view was obtainable, and they could look down upon the hacienda and with a rifle command it wholly.

"It was a mistake not to have the hacienda closer under the cliff and a little tower or fort up here, for from this point a gun would command the place," said Buffalo Bill.

Back from the cliff the four scouts went, and soon they reached the range, or rather its base, but nowhere there could a place be found to climb it.

Search as they might, skilled plainsmen that they were, they could nowhere discover a place to leave the plateau by way of the range, and Wild Winfield said:

"This explains why the cliff was not fortified.

"There is but one way to get up, as we came, and the outlaws certainly do not come and go to the hacienda this way."

"We might think so if it was not for that," and Buffalo Bill pointed to what looked like a coiled rope lying upon the ground.

Picking it up, he said, earnestly:

"See! It is a silk lasso!"

"We are on the right track!"

**CHAPTER XXV.**

**THE TELL-TALE LASSO.**

The four scouts closely examined the lasso the chief had found.

It was really of silk, closely woven, smooth, and jet black.

Opening it, the noose was found to be well made, and the length of the lasso was sixty feet.

It seemed to have been dropped where found by accident, or to have been forgotten and left there.

But it was, as Buffalo Bill had said, a tell-tale.

It plainly told that the outlaws must reach the hacienda by way of that plateau.

It also told that the outlaws could be none other than the secret foes of the valley, the tax-gatherers, and kidnappers of hostages to hold until they could secure the gold they demanded.

Again, it told that the old hacienda must have been the haunt of the outlaws, who, in some way, had gained word of the coming of the Rough Riders to their retreat.

Buffalo Bill recalled how quickly Senor Otega had learned that the hacienda was to have a master.

Then again, the finding of the silken coil told that the outlaws must be the Silk Lasso Sharps.

This much the valuable "find" had made known, and the scouts were much pleased.

"We must make another search to find where they get off of this plateau, for it did not seem to me as though they used the trees, the way we came, as there were no marks, which we would have seen.

"We will try again."

With these words from the chief, the search began again, and it was kept up until the sun was near its setting.

"Leave the silk lasso where it was found, and to-morrow we will see if it is there," said the chief.

This was done, and then the four scouts made their way back to the hacienda.

They descended by aid of the trees, as they had ascended, and went around the wall to the entrance.

Being some nine feet in height, the wall was not readily scaled.

The scouts with the cattle were coming in, as the sun was upon the horizon, and once more all was made secure for the night.

A guard only was placed at the gate, and the rest all went in to have supper.

If there were any eavesdroppers concealed in secret passages in the walls, they were disappointed, for not a word was uttered to in any way commit themselves by the scouts.

If there was a secret eye-hole through which any one was watching, the watcher saw only that the scouts treated the chief as they might the master of the ranch, and acted as though they were merely the cattlemen.

When supper was over, pipes were gotten out, and a quartet of musicians began to sing in no unmelodious tones.

There was music also by one with a guitar, another with a flute, and a third with a violin, so that the evening passed most pleasantly, and if an outlaw was on the watch in a secret hiding place, he would have to report that the new master of the ranch and his men showed no dread of the old place, and had evidently come to stay.

When bed time came but one man was placed on guard, his place being at the gate, and he was told to signal an alarm by a shot if anything went wrong.

The others all turned in, lights were put out, and all was soon as silent as the grave, save now and then a scout would tune up with a snore, until quieted by a comrade hurling a boot over at him.



Just at midnight a low moaning was heard.

As the wind had come up, and was whistling about the old hacienda, it made the moaning seem more dismal than ever.

Then deep groans were heard.

A few scouts moved uneasily at this, but no one rose, no one spoke.

The weeping of a woman followed, without causing any disturbance among the sleepers, if any one really was asleep.

Next was heard the plaintive wailing of a child.

Still no one stirred. A few minutes after there was a perfect chorus of these melancholy sounds, and still the scouts lay quietly.

Suddenly, without warning, the same unearthly, terrible shriek which had before brought all the scouts to their feet echoed through the old hacienda.

To say that some of the scouts started would be but the truth.

But all had their orders from Buffalo Bill, and not a man moved.

The shriek had caused hardly any more disturbance than had the moans, weeping, and wailing.

But, as though angry at having remained unnoticed, the shrieker sent forth peal after peal, until Buffalo Bill called out:

"Oh, quit that racket, ghost, and go back to your grave, for we can't help you."

The scouts laughed, and in a moment the sounds ceased altogether.

Nothing more disturbed the night's rest, and the morning dawned with the Rough Riders the victors.

Buffalo Bill rose early, and while breakfast was being gotten ready, he went out, scaled the cliff, and sought the spot where the silk lasso had been left.

"Pards, the silk lasso is gone.

"To-night some of us will camp out upon that cliff," he said.

## CHAPTER XXVI.

### ON THE CLIFF.

The Rough Riders all seemed particularly pleased with their chief and themselves, when they felt that they had not been turned out of their beds by the carrying on of the "ghosts" during the night.

Those who had been most superstitious took heart also, and began to feel that the "dead folks" were not so much to be dreaded after all.

The guard at the entrance had reported that the cattle had shown no restlessness, and he had neither seen nor heard anything to alarm him, save the wild shrieks up at the hacienda.

The story of the silk lasso had become known to all, and when out of earshot of the hacienda the scouts discussed it.

Buffalo Bill had picked out four men to accompany him to the cliff, when night came, to remain there on watch.

The silk lariat having proven that the outlaws went that way, an effort was to be made to capture them.

A guard was also to be stationed in the tower, one at the gate and another at the entrance to the living wing.

In case of an alarm five more scouts were to hasten over the wall, and, led by Lone Star, who knew the way, go to the help of those upon the cliff.

Buffalo Bill had selected to accompany him Texas Jack, Kit Kingdon, Rio Grande Dick, and Blue Jacket Bob, all of them splendid fellows in a close fight.

And all were to take their rifles along.

They were to carry their blankets as well, so that all could sleep while one was on the watch.

Quietly they slipped out of the gate, after dark, and, Buffalo Bill leading the way, they went around the wall to the cliff and began the steep climb by the aid of the trees.

It was no easy task by day, and doubly dangerous in the darkness.

But the climb was made in safety, and when the plateau was reached, at the point where the silk lariat had been found, the five men formed a line and, spreading their blankets upon the ground, lay down to watch.

Buffalo Bill had taken the centre position, just where he had found the silk lariat, and he told his men that they could go to sleep, as he would remain on guard and call them if he had any ground for alarm.

The men were thus stretched right across the plateau from one cliff side to another, and about a hundred yards apart.

But though each man spread his blanket, he did not go to sleep.

All were too anxious to make some discovery that would enable them to entrap the outlaws.

If there was an alarm they were to rally toward their chief, and if their foes proved too numerous they were to give a signal for help from the hacienda, and then retreat toward the cliff overlooking it.

Midnight came and passed without any sound, and then Texas Jack, who held the end position on the right, beheld a form in white coming from the cliff that looked down from the range over the plateau, and which rose several hundred feet above it.

He was instantly on the alert, and expecting that the one he saw was not alone, he dared not yet give the alarm.

Nearer and nearer drew the form in white, gliding quickly along, until suddenly Texas Jack called out sharply, "Halt!"

"Hands up!"

There was a startled cry, a quick shot at random toward Texas Jack, and the white form was off like a deer toward the cliff.

Seeing that he must get away, Texas Jack raised his rifle and fired as the shadowy form was disappearing in the darkness.

Instantly all was excitement on the plateau, the scouts rallying quickly toward Texas Jack.

But he had darted forward in pursuit, calling to his comrades to follow.

Buffalo Bill was the first to reach his side, and he was bending over a man lying upon the ground and groaning with pain.

"Stay and see what you can get out of him, Jack.

"Blue Jacket, run to the cliff and give the alarm for Lone Star Sam and his party to come in.

"Rio Grande Dick, light those lanterns and have them ready, but under cover, and then all of you follow me."

With these orders Buffalo Bill moved rapidly on toward the cliff, and as quickly as possible his men followed, two of them with lanterns.

## CHAPTER XXVII.

### A FRIEND OF LONG AGO.

Buffalo Bill reached the cliff of the range rising above the spur, and as the others came they stretched out along its base.

Blue Jacket Bob called out to say that Lone Star Sam and the others were coming, and in a quarter of an hour they were on hand, and half a dozen lanterns were following like fire flies along the wall of rock which towered above the plateau.

But not a soul was seen, nothing was found, and the whole cliff seemed to be nowhere scalable.

But the scouts kept up their search until the dawn, determined to see then if there was any discovery that could be made.

Seward Stevens, the "surgeon," had been called to the wounded man, and as Buffalo Bill went to where he lay, just as day broke, he found the scout doctor seated by his side, Texas Jack having left the unfortunate fellow to his care.

"Well, doc, how is he?"

"Perfectly conscious, sir, but he will utter no word."

"His pallid face shows that death is not far off."

"Yes, sir. I have told him that he must die, that he can live but an hour or more, and I could do nothing for him, though I have tried."

"But the wound is mortal. See," and Seward Stevens showed where the bullet had torn its way.

Buffalo Bill knelt by the side of the dying man.

He was beyond doubt an American, for his hair was light in hue, and his eyes dark blue.

He was dressed in buckskin leggings, a blue woolen shirt, moccasins, and a slouch hat, but, in strange contrast, about him was wrapped a large robe, intended to be white, though much soiled.

He had had on a belt of arms, but it had been removed by Texas Jack to make him more comfortable.

The man's blue eyes rested upon Buffalo Bill with a strange expression in them.

That he was perfectly conscious there was no doubt, and also he was aware that he was dying.

"My poor fellow, I am sorry I can do nothing for you," said Buffalo Bill, kindly.

The man shook his head.

"Can you not talk?"

"Yes."

The word was distinctly uttered.

"Will you not tell me if I can serve you in some way?"

Again he shook his head.

"Why were you masquerading as a ghost, for you thus brought your death upon yourself?"

No reply.

"Have you no kindred, no friends to whom you wish to send a last word, for faithfully will I obey any command, and my comrade here is a surgeon, and he says you cannot live?"

"I will leave no word."

"But would it not be best?"

"No."

"If you wish your friends to know of your death, upon my word I will not tell them what you are."

"I wish nothing said or done."

"Let me die in silence."

Buffalo Bill muttered simply:

"Poor fellow."

"Doc, can you not give him something to relieve his sufferings?"

"He refused it—he will soon be beyond suffering, sir."

And Doc Stevens was right, for in a few more minutes it was evident that the end was near.

Just then Texas Jack approached, and as he did so Buffalo Bill said:

"Texas Jack, the poor fellow is dying, but will utter no word to commit himself or betray his comrades."

The blue eyes of the dying man rested upon the face of Texas Jack in an earnest way.

"Jack Omohundro, I know you."

"We were boys together in far-away Virginia."

"And your hand has ended my career."

"So be it, for I might have met a worse death—ah! I see that you know me now, but do not betray me, now, or to the people at home, who believe me dead years ago."

"Give me your hand, Jack."

Into the bright eyes of the Texan, who had witnessed many a death scene, came tears that rolled down his bronzed cheeks, as he grasped the hand, unable to grasp his own, while he said, softly:

"Yes, Ned, I know you, dear boyhood friend, whatever now you are."

"We never dreamed of this in those old days—I will not betray you."

The Texan's form quivered with emotion, and a smile swept over the face of the dying man.

Buffalo Bill's fine face grew stern as death, but it was to force back the flood of feeling that rushed upon him, and Doc Stevens hastily drew his sleeve across his eyes.



Buffalo Bill had removed his broad sombrero, as Texas Jack's fell from his bowed head, and as the scouts came up one by one, they, too, took off their hats and stood respectful in the presence of coming death.

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

## MASTERS OF THE SITUATION.

Bold, fearless, reckless fellows that they were, the scouts all saw that their chief was respecting a death scene, even though it was an outlaw that was dying.

They beheld the attitude of their lieutenant, Texas Jack, saw that his hand clasped that of the dying man, and they bared their heads in compassion, for they knew that there was some link that bound the two together.

As they looked the dying man spoke: "Jack, old friend, good-by."

All heard the words, saw the smile, and then beheld the ashen hue deepen on the face of the dying man, the lips set in the death agony, and, with a convulsive struggle, the end came.

Texas Jack folded the hands upon the breast, and wrapped the white shroud-like robe about the form. "He was my boyhood friend, pard, and as he asked me to keep his secret it will die with me," said the Texan, in explanation. And I may here say that to his dying day Texas Jack never made known the identity of the outlaw.

While several of the scouts aided in removing the body to the plain below, no easy task, by the way, Buffalo Bill and the others made a search in the broad sunlight for some trace of the spot where this mysterious foe gained access to and left the spur.

But the search was in vain, and was given up.

Returning to the hacienda, Buffalo Bill found that Texas Jack was preparing to bury the dead outlaw in the old graveyard of the Mission Ranch, and all the men attended the burial.

Those who had been in the hacienda all night reported that no sound had disturbed their slumbers.

They had heard no moans, no weeping, no shriek.

"So far good," said Buffalo Bill, and he walked apart with Texas Jack, who said:

"I have something to tell you, chief."

"Well, Jack."

"I did not make mention of it at the time, as I did not wish to appear to see it, and I was afraid the actions of some of the boys might do so."

"When we were burying that unfortunate boyhood friend of mine, I glanced up at the upper cliff, the one that overlooks the plateau, and which you now see."

"There, where that pine grows, I distinctly saw a man appear, and lie down full length upon the cliff, looking over the edge at us, and I think he had a spy-glass in his hand, but, of course, the distance is too great for me to be sure of that."

"I do not doubt it, Jack; but my opinion is now that we will have no more midnight revels of ghosts, for as they have failed to frighten us, have gotten two of their men killed while playing spook, and know that we are on to their little game, they will let us alone."

"Still, the fact remains that they have some means of entering the hacienda secretly, and we must keep constantly on the alert, and also, in our hunts, endeavor to get on that high range and see what we can discover there."

"Now, what did you find on that body?"

"The silk lasso for one thing, a belt of gold for another, his weapons, and some cards."

"The gold goes into the common treasury, as also the weapons, and the lasso you have, sir."

That night the cattle were again driven into the inclosure, and a guard set at the gate.

But no sound broke the stillness of

the night, the guard was not disturbed, the cattle and horses remained quiet, and it seemed as though the weird performances of the outlaws were to end.

As it was better for the cattle to remain out at night, Buffalo Bill decided that they should do so, and Wild Winfield and six men stood guard the first night over them.

But nothing disturbed them, and as the hacienda also remained quiet during the night, it was thought that three men on duty over the cattle out in the meadow lands would be sufficient, and one at the gate, to call up the scouts if a signal for help came from the herders.

Thus another night passed away, and Buffalo Bill was deciding to make a visit to Silver Sands City to see how matters were there, when a party of horsemen were seen approaching the hacienda.

"It is Senor Otega, and he has an escort of four of his cowboys. He is wise," and Buffalo Bill walked down to greet Senor Otega as he entered the gateway.

## CHAPTER XXIX.

## THE RANCHERO'S VISIT.

Senor Otega had gazed at the cattle and the horses of the rancho of the old hacienda as he came along, and Reno Lipscomb, one of the herders whom he had asked, politely told him that Senor Cody was at home.

Arriving at the gate, he had been met by Buffalo Bill, who gave him a warm greeting, turned his escort over to Wild Winfield to look after, and led the way to the hacienda.

But before entering he warned him that not a word was to be said aloud not intended for other ears, as he had reason to believe there were eavesdroppers about.

Were there any outlaws within earshot in hiding, all that they learned was that the Senor Otega had called upon the "Senor Cody" as a new-comer in the valley and wished him a pleasant sojourn there.

When the two walked out of the hacienda together, however, the Senor Otega was told of the midnight disturbances and just what had happened, save that the outlaw killed by Texas Jack was not put down as an old friend of the Texan.

That the outlaws had been frightened off from the hacienda was also made known to the rancho, or at least that they had ceased longer to attempt to worry the inmates.

The senor, however, said:

"Don't trust them, Senor Cody, for they may strike when you least expect, and I beg of you to keep your men together as much as you can."

"Could these men capture you, for instance, they would have a hold upon your men for ransom, which they might find it hard to pay, and you would thus thwart the very reason for your coming here."

"No, senor, do not trust to one guard; do not let these fellows find you napping, and particularly see that you go not alone anywhere."

The earnest manner of Senor Otega determined Buffalo Bill to do as he advised, and not allow the outlaws the upper hand in any way.

Thanking the rancho for his advice, he asked:

"Now, senor, how goes it with you?"

"As well as can be, senor, with the sorrow upon us of our daughter held in vile imprisonment."

"Let us hope that she will not long remain so."

"Heaven grant it."

"But our trust is in you, senor, and I have great hope that all will be well through your aid."

"If I can have it so it will."

"I know that."

"But do you know that your taking the old hacienda has created a great deal of excitement in the valley?"

"Yes."

"The people were sorry to hear of a

stranger and his people coming here, and above all of his taking this old hacienda with its ill-starred record for a home."

"It is a very pleasant one, though."

"To you, who know not fear, yes."

"But my men tell me that it was whispered among the ranches that you would remain not over two nights."

"Then there were bets up in Silver Sands settlement that you would be driven out of the hacienda very quickly."

"I am still here."

"Yes."

"These wagers were made that you would even leave the valley."

"Again, men said that if you did stay here you would be soon captured by the Secret Foes, and held as a hostage for ransom."

"I must be careful that I am not, Senor Otega, for that would spoil my game."

"It would, indeed."

"But let me tell you that there is to be a big time at Silver Sands upon next Saturday."

"Indeed."

"Of what is its nature?"

"It is to be a tournament of the settlers, and all the ranch people are expected to be there."

"That will be my chance to get acquainted with the people."

"Will you go?"

"Most certainly."

"Then I shall also, and several rancheros along the valley will join us, so we can go with strong force, for each will carry all the men who can be spared from the ranches—we let them draw lots, you know, to keep from showing favoritism."

"And what kind of games are there to be, senor?"

"Skillful riding, racing, feats of strength, revolver and rifle shooting, lasso throwing and other sports, while valuable prizes will be given for each, as all of those who enter pay a liberal fee."

"I am glad that you have told me, senor, and I will go and take several of my men, for we shall enter for every prize."

"Pardon, senor, but let me suggest that this valley has the best riders, best shots, and most wonderful lasso throwers in the world. I say this to warn you against risking your money by entering."

"Thanks, senor, but myself and Rough Riders will be on hand and contest for every prize," said Buffalo Bill, with a smile.

## CHAPTER XXX.

## BUFFALO BILL'S SCHEME.

Senor Otega was loyal to his section, and he felt sure that he had men marvels of marksmanship, lasso-throwing and riding that no one else could equal.

He, therefore, was sorry that Buffalo Bill and his men should enter in a contest that would soon show them that they were not the equals of the dwellers in Silver Sands Valley in those kinds of sports.

So he tried to urge Buffalo Bill against entering the lists.

But the Chief of Scouts, though realizing the motives of the rancho, said, quietly:

"Well, senor, that tournament is the place to see the people."

"They will be there in force, and, again, though not known to us, the Secret Foes of Silver Sands Valley will also be there."

"Perhaps, by looking sharp, we may get a clue here and there to aid us, and so I will go and enter the games, though I know we are to have very dangerous antagonists in riding, throwing the lariat, and shooting."

"Still, we men of the northwest ride a little ourselves, and can shoot some."

"We will be there to see the sport through."

Senor Otega said no more, and Buffalo Bill continued:

"Now, I have been thinking of what you said about these men trying to capture me."



"Yes, senor."  
 "So I wish to try a little move that has come into my mind."

"Yes."  
 "There is one of my men here who is my counterpart in appearance, height, hair, and the way he wears his moustache."

"He has frequently been mistaken for me, and you, though knowing me fairly well, could hardly tell us apart."

"Now, I intend to have a talk with him, and ask him if he is willing to take a risk."

"From what I know of him I feel that he is, and it is just this:

"When you start home, he will go with you."

"Putting on a suit of my clothes, for I happen to be well supplied, fortunately, he will come out of the hacienda, mount one of my horses, riding one of my saddles, and carrying a belt of arms and a rifle with my name engraved on them."

"He will also wear one of my sombreros."

"You are not even to let your men know the cheat, but address him by my name, and see if they are not also deceived, for our voices even are alike."

"When he has gone some distance home with you, he will start upon his return."

"Yes, senor."

"My idea is that this hacienda is being watched all the time from yonder upper cliff, and the watchers, if they believe my pard the ranchero, will at once lay a trap to capture him upon his return."

"And I fear will do so, senor."

"That is just my idea."

"To kidnap him."

"Yes."

"But they will hold him for ransom."

"Exactly."

"Believing him to be W. F. Cody, the stranger ranchero of the Old Mission Ranch, for that is the name on my weapons, not Buffalo Bill, they will hold him for ransom, and I will be free to pay it in my own way."

"But, senor, why throw your money away?"

"I will not, for I will redeem the gold with lead and steel when the time comes, and, as a prisoner, my friend can do much to aid us, discover just who these Secret Foes are, for if there are any ropes or irons that can hold him secure, I have never heard of them."

"Why, he is an athlete, a contortionist, a slight of hand fiend, and as plucky and daring as any man I ever met."

"Why, when a prisoner among the Indians, he went through such performances that they were afraid to kill him, and let him go free, for they thought him an evil spirit."

"He must be a remarkable man, senor."

"He is, as you shall see."

"Come with me into the tower room, where I know there are no eavesdroppers, and I will have them come there at once."

The scout led the way into the hacienda, telling Wild Winfield, who was there, to send Ned Linton to him up in the tower room.

While waiting for the scout, Buffalo Bill said:

"I am sure that there is a man with a spyglass stationed on the second cliff there all the time, and he is keeping an eye upon all our movements."

"Do you know of any way, Senor Otega, that we can reach the top of yonder cliff?"

"No; for that part of the range is inaccessible to even a man."

"Are you sure?"

"That is the way it is considered in the valley, and many men have tried to reach there, but could not."

"Then that is where the retreat of the secret foes is, and we are in the right place here at the hacienda, as you will see—but here comes Ned Linton," and the scout entered as Buffalo Bill spoke his name.

## CHAPTER XXXI.

### NED LINTON'S SECRET.

The man who entered the tower room was almost a startling likeness to Buffalo Bill.

He was the same height, perhaps a trifle less slender; his hair a shade darker, but worn long; but he wore a moustache and imperial, as did the chief.

His voice, too, when he spoke, was of the same tone, and it may be that he had copied his chief's ways, but his manners and movements were similar.

The Senor Otega was surprised indeed, and mentally asserted that they were as alike as twin brothers.

"Senor Otega, my pard, Ned Linton, scout, guide, and all-round good fellow," was Buffalo Bill's introduction of the man.

The ranchero greeted him cordially, and then Buffalo Bill said:

"Ned, I believe you look like me."

"I hope so, chief," was the frank reply.

"Well, how would you like to impersonate me?"

"If I can."

"Play W. F. Cody, ranchero of the Mission Ranch—not Buffalo Bill, remember."

"Just say the word."

"It may cost you your life, you know."

"My horse may fall on me any day and do that, sir."

"I happen to know that the secret band of fiends that curse this valley would like to capture me, to hold as a bondage until I am ransomed at what they deem a correct sum."

"Yes, sir."

"The Senor Otega's daughter is their prisoner, as are also a number of people from this valley, a ransom being paid each month for their safety."

"It is an outrage."

"Yes; but the fact exists all the same, and we are here to run down these tax gatherers."

"Yes, sir."

"That they are in deadly earnest, the senor tells me that, in several cases where they have been refused the ransom money they have killed the victims they held, and left their bodies at the gates of their homes at night."

"They are in earnest then, sir."

"Yes, but they treat well all whom they get ransom for."

"What do you wish me to do, chief?"

"Return with Senor Otega half way to his home, then start back here."

"Dress up in my clothing, take my belt of arms, and the rifle bearing the name of W. F. Cody, let them capture you, if they are after me; pretend to be me, and play the game out as you see it, according to the cards you hold and the plays of the other parties."

"I understand, sir."

"I am to play W. F. Cody, ranchero; keep my eyes open for all that goes on, and take all chances for rescue by you, or death by my kidnappers."

"Just that, Ned."

"I am ready, chief, and I rather like the detail I am sent on, and hope I can carry it out with satisfaction to all, except my captors."

"I am sure that you can, Linton, if any man can; but I would suggest that you go prepared for everything that may turn up."

"I will, sir."

"We have money enough here to pay your first month's ransom, and if we need more to pay a second I will call on the Senor Otega for a loan."

"Gladly."

"Permit me to put up every peso that will be needed; for, remember, it is my daughter's escape at any price I can command, Senor Cody," earnestly said the senor.

"Well, senor, we are supplied at present, but as we are not over-rich, and the horses and cattle I have are merely borrowed from the Government, to feed through the Winter, you see we cannot sell them, if we need more cash."

"I came here with my boys to free this valley of the curse upon it."

"We ask no pay, and if we capture these men we will be amply rewarded, even if we get no booty, merely from having done a good deed."

"We have money now, but how long it will last under ransom demands we do not know, and I shall have to call on you if we really need more, not otherwise."

"My purse is yours, Senor Cody—command me."

"Well, I thank you, and hope we will not impose upon you."

"Now, Ned, you know what is expected of you, so go down and rig up in my clothes and hat, and get my weapons."

"My extra saddle, you know, bears my name in the leather, so you will be all right."

"Take some money with you, and all else you deem may be useful."

"I will put on another hat, put my hair up, and otherwise disguise myself from the eyes of those who are watching us from the upper cliffs, but on the day of the tournament in Silver Sands City, Senor Otega, I will appear as Ned Linton, cowboy, of the Mission Ranch."

Thus the game was planned, and when half an hour after Senor Otega rode away from the hacienda with Ned Linton by his side not one of his escort had any idea that it was not Senor Cody, the ranchero, while one of the herders as he passed called out:

"Better let several of us follow you, chief, for we hate to see you go alone."

"No, thanks; I am all right," was Ned Linton's answer, and the disguise was not penetrated.

## CHAPTER XXXII.

### SELECTING THE CHAMPIONS.

Buffalo Bill came out a few minutes after the departure of the Senor Otega, and Wild Winfield, glancing at him with his hair tucked up under his hat and dressed differently from his accustomed style, said, with surprise:

"Why, chief, I thought I saw you ride off with the ranchero?"

"No; for I am here."

Wild Winfield looked puzzled, but said:

"It was Ned Linton then, and rigged up in your togs, chief."

"Yes."

"I will tell you about it, and we'll let the boys not in the secret know, but remember, not a word must be spoken aloud in the hacienda, for eavesdroppers to know about it, as it might cost poor Ned his life."

The story was then told, and the men were all made acquainted with the fact by nightfall, and every one was anxious to know what would be the fate of Linton.

"We could go and rescue him, if he is captured," said Wichita Will.

"No, no; that is not it, Will, for Ned wants to be captured, you know."

"That's the little game?" said Reno Lipscomb, and all the men got the plot down as it really was.

Buffalo Bill, playing the part of Ned Linton, then told what the senor had said about the tournament at Silver Sands City, and suggested to Texas Jack, as commander, in his (the chief's) presumed absence, that he should get his men together to go there, and let them go to practicing a little.

The men who were to go were soon selected—six besides Texas Jack—and they were all to take part.

Of course, Ned Linton—the chief—was to be one, and besides there were Texas Jack, then Blue Jacket Bob, Rio Grande Dick, Wichita Will, Mustang Frank, and Lone Star Sam.

They were the best riders in the band, and dead shots, all of them, while they could throw a lasso most skilfully—in fact, better men for the work could not have been found.

The chief explained to them that there were three prizes up for each event, and



good sums the purses were, the third prize, even, being a couple of hundred pesos, the second three hundred, and first as high as five hundred dollars, with extra rewards, such as saddles, bridles, serapes, lariats, spurs, and belts of arms, to be added.

"We must pick up those prizes, pardos, and have them to show when we return to the army, as being won against men who are champions, as they are down here.

"Look to your weapons and best rig out, polish up your saddles and bridles, pick your best mounts and break them in, limber up your arms by throwing the rope, and make a few dead centre shots to get your hands in, and we'll give a fair account of ourselves," said Cody.

The men were delighted with the sport ahead.

All felt that the chief and Texas Jack had chosen well, that they had the pick of the band, as Ned Linton was away, for he was an all-round best man at everything, as all were willing to acknowledge.

There were no jealousies, no ill feeling at the choice.

The "champions" had men selected, and that meant the glorification of the band, for their triumph would be the triumph of the Rough Riders of Buffalo Bill.

They would have much to be proud of when they returned.

Wild Winfield was to remain in command of the ranch, with the balance of the men, and their duties would be doubled, they knew; but that did not matter to them.

All were willing to work for the good of each and every one.

But they all felt their thoughts turning toward the absent one.

What of Ned Linton? What would be the result of his bold venture?

But all must wait and see.

The men who were not going at once set to and helped those who had been selected for the tournament in Silver Sands City.

They helped burnish up the arms, rub up the horses, and do all in their power to aid in what they were determined should be a mighty triumph.

They would make a big score for the strangers in the valley.

They would show that the Rough Riders of the Old Mission Ranch neither feared ghosts nor men.

Each man selected two horses, and by nightfall all were prepared for the work before them, and Buffalo Bill had by no means neglected preparing with the others.

He knew that he was to bear the name of a man who was indeed a champion.

And as night came on, the guards went out for their care of the horses and cattle, others were set in the hacienda, and still Ned Linton did not return.

Had the ruse worked as hoped?

Had he really been captured by the Secret Foes of the Valley?

Or had he been killed?

The men feared the latter, though aware that Ned Linton was well able to take care of himself.

#### CHAPTER XXXIII.

##### PUT TO THE TEST.

Senor Otega rode off by the side of Ned Linton, impersonating Buffalo Bill, and he was glad to see, for the success of the scheme, that none of his cowboys, and even the men of the hacienda, suspected that he was other than he pretended to be.

As they rode along, well enough in advance of the cowboy escort to prevent their conversation from being overheard, Senor Otega, as Buffalo Bill had requested him to do, posted Ned Linton all in his power.

He told him the history of Silver Sands Valley, the starting of this feud for gold, and how many were the sufferers thereby.

He made known about the number of prisoners he would find, should he be

kidnapped, in the power of the Secret Foes.

He told who they were, and about the sums demanded for their ransom each month, and suggested that the chief must be right in his surmise that the outlaw retreat was in the range back of the Mission Ranch, though it had been believed no one could get up there.

Ned Linton listened with rapt attention.

He asked questions now and then, and at last said, with a smile:

"Well, senor, should I be captured, I am sure W. F. Cody has had his eyes well opened to the fact."

To the surprise of the senor, Ned Linton spoke in perfect Spanish.

"Why, Senor Linton—"

"Cody, if you please."

"Ah, yes. I had forgotten, when you had not."

"But you speak Spanish?"

"Yes, senor; as I do English; but that reminds me that I had better not let that fact be known, if I am captured, as I might pick up considerable information by not being able, as my captors believe, to understand Spanish."

"You are right."

"You are a shrewd man, Senor L—Cody, I mean, and will play your part well."

"I hope so."

"If you find the retreat of the Secret Foes to be on the range back of the Old Mission Ranch, you might find a chance to let it be known."

"I had thought of that, Senor Otega, and I wish you would let my chief, posing as myself, know that it will be well to keep a man on duty secretly watching those cliffs, and with a glass; but he must be concealed from the sight of any one who may be watching the hacienda from there."

"A good idea."

"I will tell the chief, for I will see him within a couple of days more, as I go by for him to accompany me to Silver Sands City to the tournament to be held there."

"That I shall miss, I am sorry to say, but I shall be well represented."

"You seem to already look upon yourself as a prisoner," said Otega, with a smile.

"I do, for those men are organized well, apparently, and as strangers in this valley they have their eyes upon us, so will seek to rope in the rancho, I am certain."

"So I feel."

"But you take it very coolly."

"Why not?"

"You know it may be death, pardon me for saying."

"Senor Otega, if I am in the discharge of duty, I would not turn from my path if I knew death was certain."

"I would rather die doing right, than live through doing wrong."

"A noble expression, senor, and I do not wonder that such men as you and your comrades, not to speak of your great chief, win fame."

"But it does surprise me, senor, that you were all not driven from that old hacienda by what you heard there."

"I am not superstitious, sir, and you know the chief is not, and a few more are that way of thinking, so ghosts had no terrors for us."

"So I have discovered, and your temerity must have been a terrible blow to the outlaws, the first setback they have thus far received in the valley."

"I hope it will not be long before they receive another, senor."

"I trust so, most sincerely."

"But there is one thing more."

"Yes, sir."

"It is that your chief seems determined to go to Silver Sands City to enter upon that tournament there."

"Why should he not?"

"Well, he will be no match, he and his men, for the champion sportsmen they meet there."

"They must find that out, sir."

"But those men up there live by that

work; they spend their lives in practice, and are not to be beaten at their own games, for they cannot be, you know."

"That I am not sure of, for no man is so great his superior cannot be found."

"But here I turn back, senor, for I saw a trail crossing ours back yonder, a very fresh one, which I am sure means that my friends are getting ready for me, and I don't like to disappoint them, you know."

#### CHAPTER XXXIV.

##### THE CAPTURE.

Senor Otega looked really sad as he halted when Ned Linton did so, to retrace his way.

He seemed to dread that the brave scout was going to his death.

"Well, senor, I must say you face the measure with great coolness, and it is your nerve that will help you out in the trying ordeal you will have to pass through," he said in a low tone.

Then, as his men rode up, he continued:

"I wish you a pleasant ride back, Senor Cody, and will be on hand to accompany you to the tournament at Silver Sands City—adios," and, with a firm grip of the hand, the two parted, the cattlemen saluting "Senor Cody" politely as they followed the rancho on his way.

Turning his horse back toward the hacienda, Ned Linton rode slowly along.

He realized fully the risk he was taking.

But he rather gloried in the danger, when he felt what good might come of it.

The fact that he would know just where the outlaws had their retreat, who they were, their numbers, and the reason of the desperate but unsuccessful game they were playing to get gold, compensated him for the chances he took.

He felt proud to have been selected for the mission of peril, and was certain that not only his resemblance to the Chief of Scouts had been the reason of his going, for his great record had much to do with it, his nerve, quickness of action in trouble, and all-round good sense.

"That trail I saw appeared to be the tracks of four or five horses, and I do not believe it was ten minutes old when we crossed it."

"If so, those fellows are four or five to one, and they will lay for me where the canyons are and the timber grows thick, just before I reach the open lands near the lake."

"Well, I could make it lively for them if it was really a case of bona fide fight, but I must go slow, for I do not care to be killed."

"Still, if I can bring down one of them it would make it more realistic, and be worthy of the chief."

"Yes, there is the place, if any, where they are in ambush."

Thus musing to himself, Ned Linton rode along at a brisk walk, his eyes taking in everything before him, though he was apparently not watchful or suspicious of danger.

He was approaching a bit of heavy timber, where the trail ran by the outlet of some small canyons, that cut into a low range of hills.

There was a valley there, through which a stream flowed, to empty into the lake, and there were boulders on each side of the trail and innumerable hiding places for man and beast.

Apparently wholly indifferent, yet intensely watchful, Ned Linton rode on.

He seemed to feel sure that he would be held up in that valley, near the canyons, and he expected it every minute.

And he was right, for suddenly, from the entrance to a little canyon upon one side, and behind a boulder upon the other, two dark coils shot out.

They straightened out as they sped through the air, and over the head of the horse settled one noose, over the head of the man the other.

The ropes tightened with a twang, as the startled horse sprang forward to be



suddenly dragged back upon his haunches.

But that thing had brought into view several mounted men in the canyon, and two on foot.

One of the mounted men was just launching another lariat to ensnare Ned Linton, yet was not quick enough, as, with his left arm free from the noose over the other and his body, he drew a weapon and got a chance to fire a shot.

The instant he had pulled trigger the third lariat settled over him, and his other arm was pinioned to his side.

But his shot had gone true, as he had aimed it, and one of the men on foot dropped dead in his tracks.

At the same instant one of the horsemen spurred alongside of him and called out:

"If you resist, Senor Cody, you are a dead man."

"I am unable to resist, or I'd take the chances," was the quiet response.

"You will not be harmed if you submit quietly, for it is your gold we want, not your life, unless you force us to take it."

"You are welcome to the little gold I have."

"Ah! you take us for common highwaymen, but we are not."

"We aim higher, as you will see."

"You have killed one of my men, but we take risks and cannot complain."

"Now, Senor Cody, I have you secure," and the man had twisted the lariat around and around the scout, taking in the saddle horn also, until he had his arms pinioned closely to his side, and had secured him in his saddle as well.

"I am sorry the Senor Otega had so large an escort, as we would have taken him in, too, for company for you," and, calling to his men to drop their dead comrade across the saddle of his horse, the one who seemed to be the leader took the weapons out of the scout's belt, grasped the reins of his horse, and led the way down to the stream that flowed through the valley, wading into it, followed by the others in single file, the animal bearing his dead rider bringing up the rear.

Taking in each one of his five captors, Ned Linton saw that they were all well mounted, armed, and wore a mask that completely hid their faces and necks, while gloves prevented their hands also from being seen.

#### CHAPTER XXXV.

##### THE HIDDEN TRAIL.

When night came on Ned Linton did not come with it.

Buffalo Bill felt anxious, and yet decided that nothing could be done until the morning.

He was certain that the scout had been met by the Secret Foes, but whether killed or not he did not know.

A close watch was kept that night, the horses and cattle driven in, and Buffalo Bill and six men were to be in the saddle at dawn to go on the trail of the missing scout.

The night passed without any disturbance, but the chief and his men were up and had breakfast, so that they rode out of the hacienda grounds at daybreak.

Texas Jack was along as apparent leader, Buffalo Bill determined to play his part as it had been begun.

He was dressed in a style that Ned Linton was wont to appear in, and rode one of the latter's horses.

The seven men rode briskly along in the trail Ned Linton had gone with the Senor Otega, and after sunrise came to the spot where the capture had been made of their comrade.

It did not take such experienced plainsmen as they were to read the situation quickly and well.

They saw where the outlaws had been lying in wait.

They saw that something of a struggle had been there, and there were red stains upon the ground, showing that one of the party at least had been wounded or killed.

This made all anxious to know whether it was their comrade or not.

Dismounting, they set to work, just as a pack of well-trained hounds are seen to do to find a lost scent.

A few minutes and it was all plain, for Buffalo Bill said:

"Yes; they came from that direction to this point and were ambushed here."

"They had men on horseback and on foot lying in wait, and there were five horses."

"Some one was hurt, as the blood-stains show, and if it had been a fatal wound and Ned, his body would have been left here."

"Let us hope that it was one of his captors; and he is just the man to get in a shot if he could, though his purpose was to be captured."

"Now, Jack, you and one of the boys go on the trail of the outlaw that leads here, and I will follow the one that leads from here."

So saying, Buffalo Bill mounted, the others doing likewise, and they set off on separate trails.

But ten minutes after they met at the brook, right where the trail Texas Jack was following came out and where the one Buffalo Bill tracked entered the stream.

"Yes, they came here by way of the stream and left the same way."

"We will go on along the valley trail to where Ned parted with Senor Otega."

This was done, and the trail of the five men, crossing theirs, was found.

It was instantly followed and led to the stream.

This was the trail which Ned Linton had noticed the day before when with the Senor Otega.

"Jack, you and two of the boys follow that trail and see where it crosses yours, and I will ride on with the rest to Senor Otega's."

Again they parted, and, going on, Buffalo Bill came to where Ned Linton had parted with the ranchero and his men.

Continuing on, they rode several miles and came upon a trail that crossed the one they were following.

There were six horses in this, and the tracks of the chief's horse, ridden by Ned Linton, were plainly seen and recognized.

The trail crossed theirs, and went toward the northeast—the same direction the one Texas Jack had followed had come from.

"Lone Star, you come with me, while Blue Jacket and Kearney Haskell follow this trail."

"It will doubtless lead into the one that Jack is on, and if you meet you can all come on after me."

"If they go on toward the large range you had best not follow it too far."

"I shall ride on to Senor Otega's ranch, and if I get away before you arrive I will branch off here and follow the trail you have taken."

Again the party divided, and Buffalo Bill and Lone Star rode rapidly on to the Otega ranch.

The senor greeted them as they dismounted and asked quickly:

"Was he captured?"

"Yes, and my men are on the trail."

"I came to get the facts that you can tell, senor."

The senor made known his parting with Ned Linton and his coming on home—that was all, for he knew no more.

Remaining to enjoy a substantial dinner at the hospitable ranch, Buffalo Bill, called by Lone Star and the senor Ned Linton, then took his leave and started back over the trail.

He branched off to where they had parted with their comrades, and just as the sun was setting they came upon the two parties united.

"Well, Jack, what discoveries?"

"We followed the trail to the rock lands, where no trail could be seen, and, while searching all about, Blue Jacket and Kearney Haskell came upon the other track, and we had dinner."

"Then we searched for several hours, but not a trace of a trail could we find, so gave it up and returned to meet you."

"That was right."

"To-morrow we will go right to that spot, and let their spies see that we are looking for the trail—for we will be watched, I am sure."

"Now for the hacienda!" And the party rode on their way to the Mission Ranch.

#### CHAPTER XXXVI.

##### THE TRAIL TO THE TOURNAMENT.

The next day, mounted upon fresh horses, the scouts, seven in number, rode to the rocky lands, where the trail had been given up by Texas Jack.

Hours were spent in the search to find where the outlaws had left the rocky valley into which the trail had led, but all in vain.

At last it was given up, and the party returned to the hacienda, Buffalo Bill remarking:

"They have certainly covered up their tracks well."

"But one thing is certain, and that is: where we gave up the trail is on the direct way to the range behind the hacienda, and there, and nowhere else, will we find the retreat of these Secret Foes."

"I have faith in Ned Linton, and it will be hard for them to hold him a prisoner, as they do the numerous other prisoners that they have in their power."

"Now, we'll rest to-morrow, and the next day the Senor Otega will be along to take us to the tournament at Silver Sands City, and we must keep our eyes open there to see if we can pick out the wolves from the throng, for that band of outlaws will be there in force, you may be sure."

The return to the hacienda was made without incident, and the night passed without an alarm.

The next day the men who intended to go to the tournament rested and practiced a little, and early on the following morning Senor Otega and his escort of eight cattlemen arrived to breakfast, as Buffalo Bill had invited him to do.

Before the cattlemen the loss of the chief ranchero Cody was discussed with deep regret, and Texas Jack did the honors as host.

But, while pretending that they did not like to go to the tournament after the capture of their chief, the scouts were persuaded by Senor Otega and his cowboys, and the picked men mounted their horses and all rode off together, Wild Winfield being left in charge of the hacienda.

Doc Stevens had been taken along, too, in case any of the men were injured, and the scouts played their game well, for it would never do to let the cowboys of the Otega Ranch know that their chief was not a prisoner, as it was not known but that one of these very men might be a spy of the Secret Foes, as they were suspected of having been at the ranch in the valley.

As they rode along, Buffalo Bill and the Senor Otega happened to be thrown together, and the former said:

"Well, senor, our plot worked well, as you know."

"Yes, and they think they have you as a prisoner."

"Yes, and have a man who will find out all that is going on in their retreat, and be very hard to hold as a prisoner when he has done so."

"If he escapes he will be the first of their prisoners who has ever done so, senor."

"Well. I do not say that he will; but Ned Linton is a man whom they will find a hard prisoner to hold."

"Now, senor, I wish to talk more with you about the mysterious lady known as the Fair Recluse of the Valley."

"Yes, senor."

"You have told me that very little is known of her."

"Almost nothing."

"She is a Mexican?"

"Yes, her father was; her mother an American I have heard."



"And she lives alone at her ranch?"  
 "With her servants and the ranch cattlemen only."

"But sees no one?"

"She receives no visitors, señor."

"And visits no one?"

"Never, to my knowledge."

"And so never leaves her home?"

"Oh, yes, she is often seen alone dashing along the trails on horseback."

"She speaks courteously when spoken to, but will hold no conversation for any length of time with any one."

"And you have said that she, too, has been struck a blow by those Secret Foes?"

"Yes, señor, through her lover."

"A Mexican officer?"

"Yes, a captain of lanceros, as I have heard."

"And he was captured by these Secret Foes?"

"Yes."

"He is a prisoner now?"

"He is."

"She paying ransom for him?"

"She does, and a large one."

"You say you have not heard of his escape?"

"Oh, no, señor."

"What, may I ask, does this Fair Recluse know of the Old Mission Ranch I occupy?"

"Nothing that I know of."

"She was never known to go there?"

"I never heard of it, señor, if she did."

"What men in this valley could there be who would capture her?"

"The Secret Foes."

"No one else?"

"No, señor; but do you know of her having been captured?"

"Yes, and now I have something to tell you, when I have asked you if you think the Fair Recluse will be at the tournament."

"I think so, señor."

"She was at the last, accompanied by a score of her attendants, and her chief of cowboys took all the first prizes."

"I hope that she will be there this time, Señor Otega," said Buffalo Bill, and then he went over the story of his rescue of the Fair Recluse and the officer with her, from the one masked man and his four followers, when he was on his way through the valley to the Fort.

Señor Otega listened with the deepest attention to all, and when no one of the men was looking he took the beautiful bracelet handed to him by the Chief of Scouts and examined it closely.

"Well, señor, I feel more than ever that you are in this valley to free us from the cruel curse that has crushed us."

"But we are coming to where we will be met by others now, on their way to Silver Sands, for there comes a party."

Other horsemen came in from a trail on the right just then, and, meeting them, Buffalo Bill took note of the fact that they had heard already of the capture of the ranchero of the Old Mission Ranch by the Secret Foes.

#### CHAPTER XXXVII.

##### THE HERMITESS OF THE HACIENDA.

As the party of horsemen neared Silver Sands their numbers increased, by others joining them, until they were fully half a hundred.

Señor Otega seemed to be a popular man in the valley, and as the other rancheros and their escorts came up, they all greeted him most cordially.

He, in turn, presented them to the men of the Mission Ranch, and Texas Jack as their leader, in the absence of their ranchero, who had been already captured by the Secret Foes.

All expressed sympathy, for all had likewise suffered, but Buffalo Bill, as one of the cattlemen, was quietly taking notes, and he set it down as a very remarkable fact that each ranchero told of the kidnapping of "Señor Cody," and said that he had already heard of the sad affair.

This looked very curious to the scout, and when he could do so he asked the Señor Otega in a whisper:

"Find out how they knew of my capture."

This Señor Otega proceeded to do in a quiet way, so as not to attract attention to his questioning.

"I say, Señor Verde, how did you learn of Señor Cody's capture?"

"From one of my men."

"And when, did you say?"

"Two days ago."

From one to the other of the rancheros the Señor Otega went in his quiet way, and found out how they had learned that the ranchero of the Mission Ranch had been kidnapped, and each one had given the same answer, that he had heard it from his men.

Then the Señor Otega was asked in a whisper:

"Find out in each case which was the man."

"Say that you wish to question him."

This the Señor Otega did cleverly.

"Now question each man, as though you wished to know just what he could tell," was whispered, and the ranchero knew that Buffalo Bill was following up some important clue, and did all he could to aid him.

As Señor Otega rode along by each man who had told the news to his employer, Buffalo Bill took a mental photograph of the cowboy.

He read their faces, noted their wild make-up, horse and saddle, and any distinguishing mark about them.

Once thus impressed upon his memory, he would know them next time they met.

And more—he had passed the word to each one of his men that they should also closely observe the cowboys with whom Señor Otega was talking.

As the party went on nearer to Silver Sands City others came into view, and among them ladies and children were often seen.

All were hastening to the settlement, to be there the next morning, when the sports were to begin, occupying the whole day.

The Señor Otega explained that nearly every party had their camping outfit along, and they would go into camp in the timber about the settlement.

A few carriages were here, a number of ambulances, some wagons, all with ladies, children, and camping outfit.

There were old men and women, young and handsome men, beautiful girls and a number of children, a few being of tenderest years.

All who heard that the men were along from the Old Mission Ranch, the Hacienda of Ill Omen, were anxious to get a look at those who had dared make such a place their home, and sympathy was frequently expressed to even Buffalo Bill that the "Ranchero Cody" had so soon felt the secret hand of the unknown foes upon him.

As they looked at the scouts, one and all who saw them were compelled to admit that they were certainly a splendid-looking set of men, sat their horses well, and might be dangerous antagonists in the sports in which they heard they were going to take part.

Within a few miles of the settlement of Silver Sands some one called out:

"Way ahead there, for here she comes!"

All looked behind them and beheld a cavalcade coming along at a whooping gallop.

At their head rode a young girl, and she dashed along with the ease of the perfect horsewoman.

She was mounted on a splendid black horse, and she wore a close-fitting black cloth habit, trimmed with silver lace and buttons.

Her hat was a black sombrero of large brim, turned up on one side, and encircled by a silver cord, while an enormous sable plume swept back and rested upon her shoulders.

Behind her, riding in couples, except the one in advance, who was their chief, came a score of cowboys, and they were well mounted and armed, while they all wore the Mexican costume.

Following came a couple of light ambulances, in one of which was a Mexican girl, the maid of the Señora Consuelo Caliente.

With a cool nod in recognition to the courteous raising of the rancheros' sombreros, as she passed them, the beautiful girl sped on and soon disappeared in the distance.

"We will camp near her," said Señor Otega, and the scouts of the Mission Ranch, half an hour after, found themselves encamped within hailing distance of the beautiful young girl whom all knew only as the Fair Hermit of the Hacienda.

#### CHAPTER XXXVIII.

##### BEFORE THE TOURNAMENT.

The settlement of Silver Sands Valley certainly loomed up when in gala trim.

Fully a thousand people were there, coming from the settlement proper, the adjacent mines and the ranches, and the little straggling hamlet known as "the city" was at its best.

Landlord Buriel had a big contract on hand to take care of his "sleepers" and "feeders," as the guests of the inn were called.

In looking over the crowd, there was seen to be a remarkable mixture of races.

In fact, many nations of the earth were represented, but Mexicans predominated, the settlers of New Mexico.

There were Indians, too, Aztecs and Comanches, and a number of half-breeds of several nationalities.

Negroes were there, too, mostly servants of the rancheros, who had found their way to Silver Sands Valley from Texas.

A few Germans, ditto Irish, a number of Spaniards, both from Spain and South American countries, some French, and a fair contingent of Americans, and the descendants of the latter, who had married Mexican women.

Taken altogether it was a gathering to shun.

But there they were, hidden away in Silver Sands Valley, the existence of which was little known beyond its sheltering ranges to other than its people, and all of them under the ban of a secret and all-powerful foe.

The rancheros were, of course, the best people of the valley, and some of them had for ancestors grand Spanish and Mexican nobles, and the best of blood from the United States.

They and their families all brought their own camping equipments, not caring to accept the accommodations of the adobe houses in the settlement, and in this they showed their wisdom.

The most picturesque camp about the settlement was that of the Señora Consuelo Caliente, the Fair Recluse.

She had a large and handsome tent, and about it camped her cowboys, in their Mexican attire, while their horses, all fine animals, were staked in the rear.

Around the camp rode a mounted sentinel, to keep away all intruders, and those who made another attempt to see the fair mistress of the hacienda were again foiled, the guard telling them that Señora Consuelo was receiving no visitors.

By a strange coincidence it seemed the camp of the strangers, the men of the Mission Ranch, was the nearest to the Señora Consuelo, Señor Otega and his men being with them.

The strangers created a favorable impression on the valley people, and many were the callers that made their way there to visit them, and were courteously received.

And many, too, were the valley people who advised the strangers not to take part in the sports of the ranchers.

There was well-meant sympathy, too, bestowed upon them, for the kidnapping of Ranchero Cody, while some philosophically told them that, as they were to be Silver Sands Valley dwellers, they must expect to suffer, as the others did, for the curse was for all.

Late in the afternoon Texas Jack



called his men together, Doc Stevens was left in camp, and the "strangers" took a canter through the settlement and to the grounds where the contests were to take place on the following day.

They presented a fine appearance, and some of the American rancheros said to each other that it would not surprise them if the strangers carried off a prize or two.

The rougher element was strongly in evidence, too, in the settlement, but there was a quiet dignity about the strangers that prevented them making any break against them.

As they rode through the "city," Texas Jack was hailed by the priest, Padre San Juan, who expressed to him his deep sorrow at the kidnapping of the Senor Cody, the latter listening to him with unmoved face.

"But this is a sorrow that is upon all, and you will be robbed, as are all others, by these Secret Foes," said the worthy padre, adding: "Why, even I have to pay a tax to be allowed to go unmolested upon my visitations among my people."

The landlord next hailed Texas Jack, told him he knew Ranchero Cody well, and was sorry for his capture, while he also advised him not to throw money away by entering the lists on the morrow, for they would not stand the slightest chance of encouragement against such men as Silver Sands Valley could bring into the field.

Riding over the grounds the scouts found them level and well suited for the sports, and then they returned to their camp.

They had gained an idea of the people, had found out about who they could trust and could not, and were sure that they would find some good men to fight against for mastery on the morrow.

Night fell upon the valley, and after supper the scouts got out their musical instruments and their music and songs charmed all within hearing.

Later the quartette slipped quietly out of camp, Buffalo Bill accompanying them, and creeping up near the tent of the Fair Recluse, they both played and sang for her, she returning the compliment by singing a ballad and accompanying herself upon her guitar, coming to the entrance to the tent to do so.

#### CHAPTER XXXIX.

##### TO WIN OR LOSE.

"Well, senor, that was the first victory won, for no one else had dared attempt to serenade the Fair Hermit of the Hacienda, or gained her notice as you have this night."

So said Senor Otega, when Buffalo Bill and his serenading quartette came back much elated by their triumph.

It was a perfect moonlight night, the moon having risen at its full as the sun went down, and all about, voices in song and the music of instruments could be heard.

But the bright moonlight had revealed the form of the Fair Hermit as she stood in the entrance to her tent, guitar in hand, and sang in a voice that was most melodious in every tone, while her maid was seen holding the canvas apart for her, revealing her, by the light behind, like a beautiful framed picture.

"I have an idea, senor, that the Fair Hermit will know me better before very long, in fact, I am determined to become better acquainted with her," was Buffalo Bill's response to the remarks of the Senor Otega.

"Ah, senor, you, like many others, I fear, have lost your heart to that beautiful, strange, and mysterious woman."

"No, senor, neither my heart is lost nor my head turned by her, but I am determined to know her better, see if I do not."

"If you say you will I suppose so it will be," was the ranchero's reply, and soon after the camps were quiet, for the contestants needed rest for the morrow.

The Chief of Scouts called his men

about him, just before they turned in for the night, and said:

"Pards, as you know, I am to be Ned Linton through this whole affair, unless some unforeseen happening forces me to declare myself.

"I shall enter for all the prizes, win or lose, and you are at liberty to do the same, as you know.

"I learn that Senor Otega is to be one of the judges, so we need expect only fair play, for one of the others is an American, a Texan, whose men are also to enter.

"The Cowboy Chief of the Fair Hermit is the one we have most to fear, it is said, and her men are all dangerous rivals, while that there will be hard ones at each sport for us to beat is certain.

"Now, we will turn in, and I know you are all of the same way of thinking, that you wish the best man to win."

With the first glimmer of dawn a bugle echoed through the valley, and aroused all.

It came from the camp of the Fair Hermit, and it was seen that the young and handsome Cowboy Chief of the ranch of the beautiful girl was the one who sent the ringing notes out over the valley.

It seemed like a challenge to one and all.

One hour later and all were riding toward the grounds of contest.

The strangers rode horses, but led the animals they were to ride in the games.

Reaching the scene, it was found to be an attractive one, for the ladies and children were in gorgeous attire, the Indians were resplendent in paint and feathers, the Mexicans were there in force, dressed in the picturesque costume of their land, and all others were ready for what was before them.

There was nothing guady about Texas Jack and his followers, but they had a "business look" in their attire and calm faces that a number thought dangerous.

All the ladies who could ride were in the saddle, and the Fair Recluse was there, near the centre, a guard of six men on either side of her, so that no one could crowd her too closely.

That she looked superbly beautiful all admitted, and yet there was a cold reserve in her face that nothing seemed to change.

Her Chief of Cowboys, known as the King of the Arena, and the four others of her following who were to contest, stood behind her, holding their horses, and with their weapons, etc., all spread out on a serape at their feet.

The "King" was a tall man for a Mexican, with a dark, handsome face, black silken beard, and wore his hair short.

A wiry, graceful form, full of strength and endurance, a flashing eye, determined, daring mouth, he looked a man to fear.

Senor Otega guided the scouts and his men, very near to the spot where the Fair Hermit sat upon her horse, and as they faced the arena, they looked calm and interested—that was all.

The Senor Otega and Texas Jack were side by side, Buffalo Bill being in line just behind them.

They saw before them a splendid battle ground, with targets off in their front, deep ditches to be ridden over, high, rocky walls to be leaped on horseback, and all extended so that the long line of observers might witness all that took place.

There was a tournament bugler, and when he gave the first call it was for all contestants to come to the stand and pay the entrance fees that went to make up the purses.

Texas Jack rode up with Senor Otega, who was showing him just how matters were to be conducted, and when the crier called out for entrance fees for the revolver match, he handed over the amount in gold for seven contestants.

"Do you intend to enter seven, senor," asked the judge.

"Oh, yes."

"So be it."

"It swells the prizes, which are three in number, and in money."

"How many will contest, senor?" asked Texas Jack.

"Ninety-three for the revolver shooting."

The rifle match was the next called, and for this Texas Jack entered seven, and paid the fees, to the surprise of the onlookers, and even Senor Otega.

The next that was to follow was the match for rough riders, which included all kinds of feats on horseback, leaping walls and ditches, dismounting at full speed, and mounting again, in fact, the wildest kind of riding.

For this match Texas Jack again handed over the fees for seven entries.

The fourth match was to be the star performance for Mexicans, the throwing of the lasso.

Again Texas Jack entered seven to contest, and the last call was for a grand race of three miles, to start up the valley and end in front of the people gathered there.

And once more Texas Jack put up his money for seven riders to enter.

#### CHAPTER XL.

##### PUT TO THE TEST.

"Well, Senor Omohundro, you certainly put up your money with remarkable confidence—fully fifteen hundred pesos," said Senor Otega, as the two turned from the paying stand.

"Just seventeen hundred and fifty pesos, senor, twenty-five to a man for each entry."

"I hope that you may at least realize some of it."

"That is why we staked it, senor, for we are in to win, to lose if we must."

"It was the unanimous vote of our band before we left the hacienda, for all chipped in the stake money, and all will lose or win."

"If it were only possible for you to win several of the prizes, first or third, it would pay you."

"Yes, and we intend to," was the confident reply of the Texan.

The news was spread around that the men of the Mission Ranch had each one entered for every game, and it was a general surprise.

Some laughed, others sneered, a few denounced it, and many felt sorry.

The King of the Arena was seen to ride up to the Senorita Consuela Caliente and spoke to her, and Buffalo Bill heard his words:

"Those American fools have entered for everything."

"Not all of them?" was the surprised query.

"Yes, all of them, and for each and every game."

The face of the beautiful girl showed surprise, and the "King" said:

"Their money is mine, for I shall win."

She smiled at this, but her response Buffalo Bill did not hear.

Just then the first signal was given to call the revolver shots into position, and mounted, as they were, the scouts rode forward.

"Ah, senors, you will surely do nothing firing from the saddle," called out Senor Otega, and others gave the same warning.

"As there is nothing against firing from the saddle in the rules, we prefer to fire that way," called back Texas Jack.

"Caramba! they will do nothing," muttered Senor Otega from his position, and others said the same. Thirty-three men stepped out to fire in the revolver match, which was to be for rapidity in firing, distance, and deadly aim.

All were surprised to see the scouts on horseback, for they could not understand it.

They would not have the slightest chance to win, was the general opinion.

The first contestants took their stand and opened fire, firing twelve shots each



at a distance of thirty paces, the score of each man being called out as he fired.

All shot fairly well, but the King of Cowboys, Senor San Elmoro, wore a confident look, and fired last, as he said to Texas Jack, "After you, senor."

"Thank you, we were the last to enter, and we will fire last," said Texas Jack.

The "King" half frowned, for he wished to be the last one to fire.

But he stepped into position, a revolver in each hand, and emptied the one in his right rapidly at the target, thirty paces distant.

The time was taken, and he had cut several seconds off of all others, and his bullets had all circled close about the bull's eye save one, and that had hit dead centre.

With the same confident smile he advanced fifteen paces, and firing with his left hand put, at that distance, all six shots in the edge of the bull's eye.

A wild shout of applause arose at this, when the time also was announced as being the quickest.

Then the men of the Mission Ranch were called, and they gave another surprise. They rode into position together, and at the word all began firing.

The rattle of the seven revolvers made rapid and merry music, and the result was startling.

They had, together, cut a couple of seconds off the Cowboy King's time, and all of the forty-two bullets were in the bull's eye, the very centre of it being cut out by the leaden messengers that struck there.

There was a lull in the crowd, and the voice of the announcer reached every ear, after the three judges had stepped up and examined the shots.

"The strangers win in time by two seconds over the Senor San Elmoro, and their shots are all closer the centre of the bull's eye save one of his."

Senor Otega set the example in cheering, and a wild shout went up, while the Cowboy King was also seen to wave his sombrero and cheer.

But the second test, at fifteen paces, was yet to be made, and first Texas Jack rode forward and emptied his revolver at this distance.

All shots entered the bull's eye.

Buffalo Bill, as the "Senor Linton," next rode to the front, and did not draw his weapon until the word to fire.

He drew then with his left hand, and the six bullets went into a space which a quarter of a dollar would circle, the bull's eye being twice as large as a dollar.

This specimen of deadly aim set the crowd wild, as the time was less than any before his, also.

The other five scouts followed as called, and each one showed that they were dead shots.

"Every one of them, senors, has fired more rapidly, and with more deadly aim than even the Senor San Elmoro, and they win the three prizes, the Senor Linton taking the first," called out the crier.

"No, with us there is no first; the prizes go to us all," answered Buffalo Bill, and a cheer greeted his words.

But the Cowboy King still wore a confident smile, and there were others there who smiled also, but it was on account of the "King" being beaten, for he had been the one all most feared.

#### CHAPTER XLI.

##### THE FIGHT FOR MASTERY.

There was considerable comment in the crowd as to the possibility of the strangers winning any more of the trials, and all was suppressed excitement as the rifle match was called.

The eyes of the Senorita Consuelo never left the contestants now, for she appeared to be in great dread that the Cowboy King might be dethroned by the strangers.

"Senors, you are wonders; but it cannot fall to your lot to be perfection at the other trials," said Senor Otega, in a low tone.

At the call for the rifle shots, the men advanced as called.

In this only one shot was allowed, and that there were splendid marksmen there was proven, for at one hundred yards' distance, not a bullet went out of the bull's eye, though not one had struck dead centre.

The Cowboy King's shot was nearest to dead centre, and he smiled in a confident way as the scouts stepped into position.

They had dismounted now, and when Texas Jack was called he stepped below Buffalo Bill, allowing him to lead.

The rifle was thrown to the shoulder, and so quickly came the shot that many supposed it had gone off prematurely.

But the announcer called out:

"Dead centre for Senor Linton of Mission Ranch."

The mark was about to be painted out when Texas Jack called out:

"Leave it there!"

"I will fire through it, and each of my men will do the same."

And then followed the report.

"Through the first bullet hole, cutting it on one side," cried the announcer.

Stepping quickly into place, the others followed, and the seven shots had cut a hole in the centre of the bull's eye, and once more came the announcement:

"The senors of the Mission Ranch win the three prizes!"

A wild yell greeted these words, for the sympathy of the crowd was with the strangers, and the Cowboy King was by no means a popular man in the valley, and those who were his adversaries in the trials were glad to see him lose, and especially to have the new men win.

But all feared that the next trial, for rough and dangerous riding, the Cowboy King would win.

There were many entries for this, and magnificent riding was shown, the Cowboy King feeling confident this time of winning.

The strangers awaited until last, and when they dashed out they at once began to duplicate all the acts of the others.

They swept in a straight line over the barriers, ditches, and swooped from their saddles with perfect ease to pick up things off of the ground.

As he rode, the "Senor Linton"—Buffalo Bill—followed one of his comrades, who tossed into the air small tin-cups, each one of which a bullet was sent through with a revolver before it touched the ground.

Then he was seen to dash along at full speed toward one of his men, who was lying prostrate upon the ground, swoop from his saddle, and, grasping him by the belt, swing him up behind him, showing how a wounded man could be taken from the field.

This act of skill and strength made the crowd wild and darkened the face of the Cowboy King and his followers like a thunder cloud.

Then one of the scouts sat on his horse holding up in his hands just over his head a tin plate, while, at tremendous speed, Buffalo Bill, Texas Jack, and Lone Star Sam dashed by and sent bullet after bullet through it from their revolvers.

The scouts then charged in a line toward a string stretched for them, and halted their horses with their breasts against it.

In spite of the riders of the valley believing that they were the champions of all, they admitted frankly that such marvelous horsemanship and feats as the scouts performed had never been seen by them before, and they went wild with enthusiasm, and only the Cowboy King bit his lips savagely when the announcer cried:

"The Senor Linton is awarded the first prize for rough riding, the Senor Omohundro the second, and the Senor Lone Star Sam the third, while the rest of the strangers would have won the prizes over the other contestants, had not the three named been the victors."

The cheers that greeted this announcement showed that there were few to say

nay to the decision of the judges, and Buffalo Bill, as he went back to his position, heard the Senorita Consuelo say, in a low tone, to the Cowboy King:

"You can learn from those strangers, you see."

"But I have faith in you with the lasso, and believe your horse will win in the races, for he certainly has no equal in this valley."

The Cowboy King frowned and growled forth a reply that Buffalo Bill did not catch, but which sounded like a malediction.

"Pards, the King is to beat us with the lasso, so beware, and he has the fleetest horse in the valley, so look out for him."

#### CHAPTER XLII.

##### A LULL IN THE BATTLE.

In answer to the remark of their chief, whom each one of the scouts frankly acknowledged was "King of them all" in all deeds of daring and sports, Lone Star Sam responded:

"They are pretty good in this valley, only they have not seen what the world can do outside, and judge others by themselves."

"Now, that dandy cowboy there is a fine shot, rides splendidly, and I'll wager can throw a lariat that will teach us something, maybe, unless it is you, chief, and he has doubtless got a very fast horse there."

"But we have had a deal more practice in shooting, where our lives depended upon deadly aim, and our riding has been our strong point, while our horses, I am sure, can drop these valley ponies far behind, unless it is a few of them that look dangerous."

"Shall we all enter for the lasso game, chief?"

"Oh, yes, for I know what you can do, and Rio Grande Dick also, and you have seen Jack and myself sling a rope, so some of us ought to capture one prize, at least, though that Cowboy King does look dangerous, Sam."

"All right, sir."

"But do you know that I have been noticing that Fair Hermit pretty close, and I'll take oath she seems more pleased when we win than sorry."

"I really think she wants that dandy Cowboy King to be downed."

"I have noticed the same thing, Sam, and let me tell you that there is more between those two than appears upon the surface."

"There is, sir."

"But here comes Senor Otega, and if we were his own people he could not be more pleased than he is."

"No, and the Cowboy King looks daggers at him the way he treats us," and Buffalo Bill turned to greet the Senor Otega, who said earnestly:

"You are masters, all of you, senors, and have taught our people what shooting and riding really is."

"But let me tell you that in lasso throwing the men here are all kings, so I fear you cannot keep up your record there, nor your horses match ours in speed and endurance."

"We can handle a lasso some, senor, and we think our horses are both fast and good stayers; but time will tell," said Buffalo Bill, to whom Senor Otega said, in a low tone:

"You are King of your men, Senor Cody, and the people here all say so, though any one of them can best our boys of the valley, even the Cowboy King."

"What a band of men you have."

"But the dinner hour is over, and they will soon call the men to the lasso test."

"We shall be ready," was the quiet reply of Buffalo Bill.

A recess of an hour for dinner had been given, and the scouts had eaten a light lunch, and then looked to their horses.

The crowd had been circulating around, gazing at the strangers as though they were superior beings, and asking them many questions, all of which were courteously answered.



Many of the rancheros had called to congratulate them, and the worthy padre had been most enthusiastic over them, but constantly bewailed the kidnapping of "his dear friend, the Senor Cody," which brought a smile to the faces of the scout.

"Is he as good as the rest of you?" he asked.

"He is my equal in all that we do," replied Buffalo Bill.

"And you are wonderful, Senor Linton—the champion of champions, I should say."

"Thanks, padre."

"And do you know I think you resemble my dear friend, the Senor Cody, a little."

"Yes. I am said to be like him in more ways than one."

"Not so tall, perhaps, but yet like him."

"Ah! I hope no harm has befallen him other than his capture by those terrible marauders."

"But I suppose you will have a demand for ransom for him made upon you soon, and let me urge that you lose no time in paying it, for those men, whoever they are, give but one notice, then kill their victim."

"We will heed it, Senor Padre, for we will use our prize money won to-day," said Buffalo Bill, and just then the bugler blew the call for the lasso throwers to assemble.

"Beware of the Cowboy King, with the lasso, senors, for he is El Diablo," called out the worthy padre, as the seven scouts mounted their horses and rode to the front to join in the lasso-throwing contest.

As the strangers had proven so dangerous some of the lasso throwers, after paying their entrance fees, had been frightened off, and had withdrawn.

But the Cowboy King was there, with his following, and a dozen more of the best men with the lariat that could be found in the Silver Sands Valley.

#### CHAPTER XLIII.

##### THE LASSO SHARPS.

Including the scouts, who were so well carrying on their work as detectives, there were thirty-three "lasso sharps" who rode into the field to contest for the prizes.

They were a fine-looking set of men, well mounted, and all looked confident, save the scouts, whose faces wore an expression that no one could read.

But the same look had been there before in the other feats through which they had so triumphantly passed.

Without appearing to be, they took notice of all that went on, and measured their adversaries most critically.

The Cowboy King's dark frown had disappeared.

He felt that he was not only master now, but there were a dozen men of the valley who could teach the strangers what lasso throwing was, whatever they might know as to shooting and riding.

The first to begin were half a dozen men from the lower ranches, and they threw their lariats with consummate skill, catching each other as they rode, lassoing horses, and performing many difficult feats that were applauded.

Then followed others, and they, too, won applause and ceased their work with the grand confidence that nothing could beat them.

The Cowboy King again moved for the strangers to precede him, but Texas Jack said, firmly:

"No, we entered last, and we shall be the last to show what we can do."

The Cowboy King frowned, and then dashed out with his six followers.

It was an expert specimen of skill, and won applause from the stranger scouts with the others, for many most difficult feats were performed, the "King" showing himself easily the master of the others.

Then the scouts were called, and they dashed forward as one, wheeled, and, forming single file, still racing at full

speed, forty feet apart, the lariats were thrown together, and each noose caught on the left hind leg of the horse immediately in front of the thrower, the leader hurling his coil backward over the saddle and catching the man nearest to him over the head.

Their very first feat showed the strangers were to be feared, and, as they turned from one throw to another, the crowd went wild with enthusiasm, the Fair Hermit applauded vigorously with her little hands, while the face of the Cowboy King became white with rage.

Riding at full speed, the scouts then kept their lassos curling in the air, while a small dog that skurried across the grounds was caught by Buffalo Bill, yanked up into his arms, released, and set down unhurt, and the speed of his horse not checked.

The lasso throwers of the valley made no dispute of the judges' decision that the "strangers" were again the victors.

The next on the list, and the last, was the long race, and the scouts' horses reserved for this were mounted and ridden to the starting point, three miles away.

From the field the start could be seen far down the valley, and the winning post was to be at the end of the line of the crowd.

All was expectation now, and confidence that the horses of the strangers could not win was freely expressed.

As for the scouts, they knew their horses well, and Texas Jack remarked:

"This is a picnic for us, save several horses in that Cowboy King's outfit."

"The ponies in this valley are good ones, no doubt, but the people must be taught that they are not the champions of the world."

"Yes, I have often observed, Jack, that a small community believes that they have the garden spot of earth for their home, and are a select and chosen people; but their narrow minds expand when they see something of life elsewhere."

"Now we are good, I know, but there are men elsewhere who might down us at our own games, and that Cowboy King is one, only he's too mad to-day to do himself justice," and this opinion was shared by the others of the hacienda band, while Blue Jacket Bob remarked:

"And look out for that horse he rides."

"I'm glad you've got your horse, Run-away, Chief."

"So am I, Bob," returned Buffalo Bill, and it was evident that the scouts had all picked the Cowboy King's horse for a more than probable winner, while the crowd felt sure that their valley horses were sure to show what they could do.

Down the valley, then, they rode, a hundred in number, for horseracing was a game that all could play at, and then, too, there were plenty of men who believed their own horses the fleetest, or could find good excuses to offer should they not so prove themselves.

The trail up the valley was a straight one, a league was the distance, and the start was to be made from a standstill.

#### CHAPTER XLIV.

##### THE RACERS.

When the line was formed, the scouts were at one end, the Cowboy King being in the centre.

Mounted men who were not to be in the race were every thirty feet apart, holding lariats before the starters, and which were to be dropped at the word of the one who had the race in charge.

When they were all in line, many of the spirited horses were very nervous, but the Cowboy King's splendid animal seemed to know what he had to do, and was as quiet as a lamb, but ready for the leap at the word.

The horses of the scouts were also under control, but went off together as the lariats were dropped.

The animal of the Cowboy King had the trail, and his followers were on either side of him.

Therein was an advantage, for the

riders on either side had to ride obliquely to get into the trail.

Within a minute the horses began to stretch well out, and when a mile had been run, a quarter of a mile was between the leader and the last racer.

And the Cowboy King it was who was leading the hundred striving horses.

Just behind this handsome young Mexican, the champion of the Caliente hacienda, his own men kept as well up as they could to their leader.

Then came the seven fine animals of the men of the Mission Ranch, but all of a hundred yards behind the leaders.

Behind them were bunched a score of racers, and then came the stragglers, on their purposely held horses, for the race is not always to the swift.

Two miles were gone over, and the racers had changed a little.

The Cowboy King still led, but his men were well back, and the seven scouts were upon even terms with them.

A long distance ahead the Cowboy King seemed, as the people looked down the long stretch at him, coming along like the wind.

Another quarter of a mile was swept over and the Cowboy King's followers were in third place; the scouts had taken the lead of them.

Another quarter, and then a horse suddenly shot out from the bunch of strangers, and went swiftly after the leader.

The horses of all the strangers, too, began to close up the gap between themselves and the Cowboy King.

What did it mean? What could it mean? all asked.

Could those seven riders show the way to the matchless animal the Cowboy King rode?

The crowd grew wild with suspense.

They saw one animal at last coming up swiftly behind the King.

The Cowboy King looked behind him and his face turned pale.

He had paid no heed to those who followed, with the lead he had.

And that quick glance showed him a long-bodied roan horse, his head stretched far out, his clean limbs nimble as a deer, pressing hard the horse he deemed unequalled.

And more, he saw on that flying roan the stranger who had led in all the sports, who had dethroned him, and who was now threatening to tear another prize from him, the last one, and in the face of those who had crowned him "the King."

For the first time in his life the splendid horse he rode felt the cruel spurs.

He gave a wild, angry snort as they touched his flanks, and sprang forward at greater speed.

Then the Cowboy King glanced back with triumph.

But again his face became of deadly hue, as he saw the roan had also quickened his pace.

And, worse still, the other strangers were coming on, having given their horses full rein, at a speed he deemed not in their bones.

Again and again the cruel spurs sunk deep.

The goal was not far ahead, there were the onlookers in breathless silence, in painful suspense.

They saw that unless the Cowboy King rode still faster one, at least, of the strangers must pass him, unless his horse gave out.

Would he do so? questioning eyes asked each other, for no one spoke.

All was a deathlike silence save the pattering of the ringing hoofs in advance, the thunder of the many far back in the rear.

Nearer and nearer to the goal drew the Cowboy King, and closer and closer upon his heels came the stranger known as "Senor Linton."

And those who looked saw that the Cowboy King was cruelly raking the flanks of his horse, that the rider was leaning far forward, as though to drag him along, that that rider's face was as white as a corpse.



Nor was that all that they saw.

Behind him, but a few lengths, came the bounding roan.

He was running free, too, with apparently no terrible strain such as his rival was under.

And the rider, with no touch of the spur to his horse, was seated upright in his saddle, while upon his face was a smile, and no trace of anxiety as to the result, a face unmoved by the excitement.

And still more was seen, for not far away came the other strangers, stretched out in single file, according to the speed of their horses.

The next instant the "Senor Linton" was alongside of the Cowboy King.

Then, with a sudden leap, he left his saddle, ran a few steps alongside of his horse, threw himself once more on his back, right before the crowd, up to which they had come now, and then with a word to his horse went away from the Cowboy King with a speed that was startling.

#### CHAPTER XLV.

##### A STRANGE EXCHANGE.

As though to show the Cowboy King that horse and man had been playing with him, the gallant rider of the roan once more dismounted while at full speed, and bounding along by the side of the flying animal for a few paces, his hand on the saddle horn, he threw himself again into the saddle, and swept by the winning post an easy winner.

The yells of the crowd were terrific, and in the victory of "Senor Linton" the Cowboy King was momentarily forgotten.

But only for an instant, for there arose a cry of alarm, and of voices shouting: "Ride for your life, for they are upon you!"

It was true.

The "King" was desperately struggling now for second place, for right upon the heels of his horse were two of the strangers.

They were Texas Jack and Lone Star Sam.

Their horses were stretched out at full speed now, and their spurs were in their flanks.

They must wrest the two prizes from the Cowboy King.

The second and third purses must fall to them.

Not a prize must be taken by a horse or man from the valley.

Behind these two came the other scouts.

These four were riding together.

Though not very far behind, they were not urging their horses, being confident, seemingly, that their two comrades could give a good account of themselves.

Behind them four others were coming on.

One man was quite near them, another a few paces back, and thus they were stretched out to the bunch of half a hundred horsemen a couple of hundred yards back.

Behind these were the men whose horses were not really in the race, and who straggled back for half a mile.

But the King of the Hacienda cowboys, the men of the ranch of the Fair Hermit?

He was within fifty yards of the goal, and there the victor stood by the side of his panting horse watching the others come in.

There was no look of triumph on his face, no expression of dread as to whether his comrades would win or lose.

He calmly awaited the result.

Still leaning forward, still raking the flanks of his horse with his spurs, his face white and eyes glaring, the Cowboy King came on.

His horse could do no more.

He was straining his utmost, and his nostrils were wide open as he drew in the air to force him along.

His ears were laid flat back upon his neck, his eyes were fairly starting from their sockets, for the noble animal was determined to win or die.

He realized that he had found his master in one horse, that there were others on either flank, and he must not yield to them.

All those who looked on were trembling with excitement, though now no word was uttered.

All waited for the end.

A few more bounds and the post would be reached.

But those two horses on either flank would not be shaken off.

Their heads were level now with the saddle horn of the Cowboy King.

Another second and they were neck and neck with the splendid, game valley champion.

A few seconds more and the story would be told.

Then came a cry from the lips of each scout to his horse, and a touch of the spurs harder than before.

Their horses responded with a bound, and their effort carried them to the front, a good length in the lead of the valley horse, and thus they swept by the post.

The three prizes had been won by the men of the Mission Ranch.

A moment of silence, and then came a wild yell of applause, and the face of the Cowboy King, as he leaped from the saddle, grew black as night.

"Pardon, senor, but you have a noble, a splendid, animal, there; a gamer one I never saw, and I would like to own him."

The speaker was the "Senor Linton." "He is not for sale," was the abrupt reply of the defeated Mexican.

"I am sorry, for I love a game horse such as he is, and would give five hundred pesos for him."

The Cowboy King was walking away, leaving his horse to an attendant to care for.

But he halted at the words of the scout, and said:

"As you seem to prize the animal so highly, I'll trade him even for that roan of yours."

"Senor, I am not one to back down, and I accept your terms," was the reply of the scout, to the utter amazement of all who heard him, especially of his own comrades and the Senor Otega.

But the exchange was made, and the Cowboy King became master of the champion horse of the Silver Sands Valley.

#### CHAPTER XLVI.

##### THE FANDANGO.

"Well, chief, you have got more nerve than I ever gave you credit for, to make that exchange of horses, for any animal among our runners can beat him in a short race or a long one."

So said Texas Jack to Buffalo Bill, as the latter was devoting himself to the care of the horse he had just traded for, while the Cowboy King's wholesale defeat seemed to be tempered by the bargain he had gotten in the scout's roan, which a large crowd was viewing, and commenting on the fact that he did not appear to feel the race in the slightest.

"Well, Jack, I wanted the Cowboy's horse for a purpose, and maybe some day I can get mine back again," was Buffalo Bill's reply.

Then the scouts went over to the stand of the judges, as a messenger had been sent for them to come and get their prize money.

The crowd gathered around them as they assembled there, and, complimenting them upon their splendid success, Senor Otega handed the purses over, Texas Jack receiving them for all, while the crowd cheered.

But in that crowd there was not one man of the Fair Hermit's ranch visible, as she had already left for her camp.

As the scouts rode out to their camp they overtook some of her men with packhorses, loaded with purchases at the stores, and soon after the Senorita Consuelo was seen to depart with her people, though night was not far away.

"They will camp on the trail to-night, on their way home, and a disappointed party they are, though the Fair Hermit

never does stay to the fandangos that follow the sports.

"Will you stay, senor?" asked Senor Otega.

"Yes, I would like to get better acquainted with the people," returned Buffalo Bill.

"You will be a lion, senor, after what you have done to-day."

"It is not to be lionized, but to find out all I can about these people, that I stay, Senor Otega."

"Well, I shall remain with you."

After supper in camp, Buffalo Bill took a look at his new horse.

His glands were cut and swollen, and he looked gaunt and tired, but the scout said:

"He'll be all right to-morrow, though a little red up."

"He is a fine horse, and game to the heart, but my roan could have distanced him had I wished it, and I believe, as you say, Jack, that any of our runners can outfoot him, or outlast him."

"Still I am satisfied with my trade, and expect this horse to serve me well."

"If you are satisfied, chief, that is all that is necessary."

"But there is great talk about you on account of you being so game as not to back down under the offer of a fair exchange the Cowboy King made you."

"I deserve no credit for it, Jack, for I wanted this horse, and intended to have him if I was to give my horse and boot for him."

Texas Jack said no more to his chief, but to Lone Star he remarked later:

"There is some deep reason for the chief's trading off his roan that we don't see through."

"Yes, he's playing a game, I'm sure," was the answer.

The camps were left under the care of Blue Jacket Bob and Rio Grande Dick, while the others went to the fandango, including Doc Stevens, whose services had not been called upon by any of his comrades, though he had doctored a few of the valley people with broken heads and arms.

Senor Otega was the guide, and upon their arrival at the inn they found there crowds of men and a number of the fair dwellers of the valley.

"All will go well while the better element remain, up to the supper at midnight, after which the rancheros and their families leave, and then it will become a scene of carousal and bloodshed," explained Senor Otega.

The strangers found themselves at once heroes, while the achievements of the "Senor Linton," added to his handsome face and splendid form, made him indeed the "lion" of the hour.

He was sought after by men who wished to be friendly, by the rancheros down the valley, who were glad to present him to their families, along with his comrades; and the scouts were soon "in the swim" with all, as they very quickly discovered.

But they did not lose their heads, as it were, and, though dancing and flirting with the pretty senoras and senoritas, and courteous to the men, they did not accept the many invitations to drink that were showered upon them.

"Keep your heads clear, boys, and your eyes open, for though all appear to be friends, many of the men are terribly cut up at our victories, and only wish a chance for trouble."

This good advice of Buffalo Bill had its effect, and when, after supper, the rancheros began to leave, the scouts also slipped quietly away with them, to the great disappointment of a gang who had planned to cause trouble with them, and in the melee rob them.

They had spent their money most generously, had treated others, though not drinking themselves, and had kept up the good impression that they had made with all save the few who felt sore at being defeated by strangers, and who intended, as they said, to "square matters in their own way."

But the sudden and quiet departure



of the scouts thwarted them, and unless they boldly went to their camp and attacked them, they saw no chance of "squaring matters."

Arriving at their camp, Blue Jacket Bob stood there alone, and he had a story to tell which was listened to with stern faces by Buffalo Bill and his Rough Riders.

#### CHAPTER XLVII.

##### BLUE JACKET BOB AT BAY.

Senor Otega was with the scouts upon their return from the fandango, and his camp was just to one side of theirs, not two hundred feet away.

As all came up, and Senor Otega's men had left with the scouts, there stood Blue Jacket Bob in the moonlight, and awaiting them.

"Ho, Doc, I have a wound in my arm for you to dress, and it needs it, for I could not go to look you up, being all alone in camp," called out Blue Jacket Bob.

"Why, where is Rio Grande Dick, Bob?" asked Buffalo Bill.

"I am very sorry to tell you, sir, that he is dead."

"Dead!"

"Rio Grande Dick dead?" asked the chief, in utter amazement.

"Yes, sir."

"How was it, Bob?"

"I'll tell you."

"First let me see to your wound."

"Why did you not send one of Senor Otega's men after me, Bob?"

"They are both dead, sir."

This news was startling.

But Buffalo Bill could see that Blue Jacket Bob was suffering, and he insisted that he should not make a report until his wound had been looked to.

This was now done by Doc Stevens, who said:

"It is not dangerous, but he has lost considerable blood."

"Here is the bullet—give him a drink, please."

The bullet had been extracted from the shoulder, a drink of brandy was given the wounded man, and as soon as he was made comfortable he said:

"There lies poor Dick over there, chief, and the Senor Otega's men are not far away, and one other besides."

"All dead?"

"Yes, sir."

"Bring their bodies out of the shadow into the moonlight here," ordered Buffalo Bill.

It was done, and then the chief said:

"How was it, Bob?"

"You see that man lying yonder?"

"Yes."

"He was one of the Cowboy King's men."

"Yes, I remember him, and he seemed next in authority to him."

"I guess he was."

"What was he doing here?"

"He came here and asked for Senor Otega's camp."

"There is his horse, hitched where he left him."

"Yes."

"Dick directed him, and after remaining awhile there he came over to our camp with the two men left there by Senor Otega."

"Well?"

"One of the latter said to us that they had brought a friend of theirs over who wanted to know us, and he had some fine liquor and cigars, and wished us to join him."

"I said that we did not drink, but would smoke with them, and asked them to be seated."

"We all sat down here, and were talking over the day's sports, when the stranger called out suddenly:

"Now!"

"The three men, with that, at once drew their revolvers and turned them on us."

"But, though we were taken by surprise, we are quick on the draw, and our revolvers were going off with theirs, and for a second or so it was lively here."

"We all sprang to cover of the timber, of course, and so we had it."

"I don't think it lasted half a minute, and then I found I was the only one standing up, and I was wounded."

"I walked over to where those three traitors lay, but they were dead."

"I then went to poor Dick."

"He was gasping, but murmured something about a plot to kill us and get the prize money; that he had seen the senor's two men talking with strangers several times during the day."

"Then he grasped my hand, and the poor boy was gone."

As he spoke, Bob brushed tears from his eyes, and there were others who felt the pearly drops trickle down their bronzed cheeks as they thought of their dead comrade.

The scouts had listened with rapt attention to Blue Jacket Bob's story, and Buffalo Bill said:

"Bob, you have done nobly, old fellow, and there is proof lying before us of your plucky fight against odds."

"With the popping of revolvers all about to-night, I suppose none of the other camps suspected trouble here."

"Now, senor, what is your opinion of the treachery of your men to-night?" and the chief turned to the ranchero, who replied:

"I can only say, senor, that those two men were not selected to come with me, and they paid two others to let them take their places, as I was told to-day."

"When we went to the fandango I told my men to arrange among themselves as to who would remain in camp, and it seems those two stayed."

"Yes, senor, they bought off the two whom I told to remain," said the senor's chief of cattlemen.

"Then they remained to rob this camp, Senor Linton, and failed, though they had one of the Fair Hermit's cattlemen as an ally."

"Yes, that was their game," and as Buffalo Bill spoke, not willing to let the other men of Senor Otega know that he was in authority, he whispered to Texas Jack to have the bodies of the three men thoroughly searched.

#### CHAPTER XLVIII.

##### BEARDING THE LION IN HIS DEN.

"At this rate, we'll get rich off of dead bodies, for every one of these fellows appears to have a belt of gold on him."

"There was the ghost killed at the hacienda, the man on the plateau, the one who had you up on the trail, Senor Otega, and now your two cattlemen here, and the cowboy from the ranch of the Fair Hermit, all have their belts of gold," said Buffalo Bill, when the three bodies had been searched.

As Senor Otega had sent his men over to his camp, he remaining with the scouts, Texas Jack said: "And each of the three had one of these, chief."

He held up as he spoke three miniature lassos of silk.

"Ah! It is as I suspected, they belonged to the gang of Silk Lasso Sharps."

"What a pity it is that they all get killed, that we cannot entrap one alive, or wound and capture one."

"It is, indeed, a pity, Senor Cody."

"But you recall that I told you the Secret Foes had spies on every ranch, or were suspected of having?"

"Yes, Senor Otega."

"Well, these two were the spies on my ranch, as has been proven."

"I see."

"And the other man was a comrade of theirs, and hence a spy on the ranch of the Fair Hermit."

"I guess you are right."

"But with the three before killed and these three, we are slightly thinning out the band of Secret Foes."

"You most certainly are."

"Now, what is to be done with these bodies, for poor Dick we will take with us for burial at the ranch?"

"It would be best if you ride over with me and report the affair to the Alcalde."

"Who is he?"

"The landlord, the Senor Buriel."

"All right."

"Jack, you and three others be within call if I need you, for I may have to shoot the Alcalde," said Buffalo Bill, to the surprise of Senor Otega, who cried:

"Oh, senor!"

"If ever there was a scamp, Senor Otega, that landlord is one, and I shall stand no nonsense with him."

"Jack, I'll say that you sent me to report."

"All right, sir, and you'll find us within call."

With this, Buffalo Bill and the Senor Otega mounted their horses and rode away from the camp, Texas Jack, Lone Star Sam, and Mustang Frank following soon after.

The landlord was in the fandango hall, but he was called into his office by Senor Otega, who said at once:

"Senor Alcalde, we have an unfortunate affair to report to you."

"The Senor Linton, I suppose, could not stand so much success, and has killed some one."

The look the man got from the scout made him wince, but the words were calmly uttered:

"You must not jump at conclusions, sir, or I might be tempted to punish impertinence."

"I am here by order of our Cowboy Chief to report to you that two of our men were left to guard camp, while the rest came to the fandango."

"We returned to find that one of our men had been killed, the other wounded, and the three men who had gone there to rob the camp were lying dead, having been shot by our comrade, Blue Jacket Bob."

"This is bad, very bad."

"The three men were those whom we had reason to believe friends, for two were Senor Otega's cowboys, left by him in charge of the camp, and the other was a cattleman of the band of the Cowboy King, and he it was who returned and arranged the robbery, which ended in the loss of their lives."

"This is bad, very bad."

"Why did not your chief, Senor Omohundro, come?"

"He sent me in his stead."

"I must demand the man who did this killing, and while the Senor Otega goes to fetch him I will hold you as hostage, Senor Linton."

"You shall neither take Blue Jacket Bob, nor will you keep me here."

"I have reported the facts, and it is a pretty state of affairs when we cannot protect our camp and our lives."

"If you wish to have a trial, name the day and we will be here."

"And I will guarantee on bond, Senor Alcalde, for the appearance of the accused man," said Senor Otega.

"I must have a guarantee from them also."

"They won a large sum in gold to-day, their prizes, and it must be placed in my hands."

Buffalo Bill laughed, and replied:

"You doubt my word, and I have no reason not to doubt you, and, in fact, do."

"No, I'll pledge my word, and remember, the Senor Otega here shall give no bond for us, and we will be here on the day you set for trial."

"I wish a guarantee."

"See here, Landlord Buriel, you shall have none."

"With your own people you would not even consider this justifiable killing of three robbers and murderers."

"We are here in this valley as are others, and you shall not make us an exception."

"But I must punish murder," and the landlord was all in a tremor.

"There was no murder, save the killing of my poor comrade by those men who were murderers and robbers."

"Blue Jacket Bob acted in self-defense, and I'll tell you to your face, if you dare attempt to hold me a prisoner, or arrest my comrade, I'll make known to



these people the confession of one of those three men, and a dying man does not lie.

"I alone know that confession, Landlord Alcalde, or whatever you choose to call yourself, and I will make it known, and leave it for you to prove that dying lips lied.

"Do you grasp my meaning as I intend you shall, Senor Buriel?" and Buffalo Bill looked the landlord straight in the face as he asked this question.

#### CHAPTER XLIX. TAMING AN ALCALDE.

Senor Otega stood amazed at the bold words of Buffalo Bill.

He knew perfectly well that there had been no dying confession; he was surprised, startled, in fact, at the daring shown by the scout, and flinging into the face of a man whom every one in the valley stood in fear of, a charge of guilt, as it were.

He glanced at the Alcalde, expecting a terrible outbreak.

Instead he saw that his face was livid, that his lips were drawn back from his white teeth like a snarling dog, and they were clicking together with a nervous chill.

"Senor Otega, retire a moment, please, for I wish to ask our friend here of this man's confession."

The voice of the Alcalde was hardly audible.

A glance at Buffalo Bill and the Senor Otega saw a sign for him to go.

"I will soon join you, senor, as the Alcalde will not detain me long," said the scout, pleasantly.

When the door closed behind Otega the Alcalde said in a low tone:

"Who made this confession you speak of?"

"I do not know the name of the man of the Cowboy King's band," was the evasive reply.

"Ah! It was he?"

"Shall I tell you that the confession appeared like that of a man who sought to destroy you, Alcalde; but where there is smoke you will always find fire, and were I to speak there are plenty to listen, though I myself might not believe that you can be guilty.

"Suppose we square this matter by your giving me a discharge for my comrade; in other words, that he acted in self-defense, and you bury the three bodies at your expense."

"Yes, yes, senor, that will do, for I have no desire to prosecute you or your comrades.

"You are strangers in our valley, and your chief, my dear friend, Senor Cody, has been kidnapped or killed by the Secret Foes, and now another of your friends has lost his life.

"Yes, I will give you the paper asked, and in return your lips are sealed about the confession of that dying man.

"As you said, it was the malignant confession on the eve of death, to ruin me, for we had had some trouble several times, and there is not a word of truth in it."

"I did not tell you what he had said."

"No, no," and the Alcalde looked most anxious.

"Just write out the paper for my pard, please—his name is Robert Meade, nicknamed Blue Jacket Bob."

"I see," and the Alcalde hastily filled in a discharge and handed it to the scout, saying as he did so:

"Now there is no charge, you know."

"Thanks, senor."

"Now, what did that wicked man have to say about me?"

"Well, I heard enough to know you were in some way allied to these Secret Foes of the Valley, and kept by fear of death of making known all that you are aware of."

"Nonsense, senor, utter nonsense!"

"Still it is best not to let it be known that I had such a charge against me, and you are not to speak of it, you know."

"Not one word I ever heard from that dying man against you, senor, shall ever

pass my lips, at least as long as you don't forget."

"Then that will be all right.

"I will call in the Senor Otega, and you are to have a glass of wine with me."

"Thanks, but I do not often drink; the Senor Otega never does, and you must excuse us.

"But you will send over for the bodies, for we shall leave camp to-night."

"Yes, I will return with you, with two of my men, and take them in charge."

Senor Otega was again surprised when the Alcalde and the scout came out together, and as Texas Jack saw them approaching he and his comrades hastened back to camp.

The Alcalde had two men and a wagon to follow him, and the bodies of the three robbers were taken back into the settlement, where there was already plenty more work for the landlord in his magisterial capacity, there having been a riot in the fandango, and half a score of men lay around dead, while many more were wounded.

"Those three dead from our camp will fit in with the ones slain at the fandango," said Senor Otega, as he rode with Buffalo Bill as they started on their homeward trail just before dawn.

"Oh, yes, the Alcalde will fix things up all right, and I have Blue Jacket Bob's acquittal paper here," replied Buffalo Bill.

"And, senor, how did you manage it?"

"Easy enough."

"Well, you played the boldest game I ever saw, and you are the first one who ever frightened Alcalde Buriel, I assure you.

"Why, not one of those men made a confession."

"No, but if he thought they did, and he was guilty, it was just as well as though they had."

"Yes, just as well," and Senor Otega was lost in admiration at the bold deed of Buffalo Bill in bringing the Alcalde to terms.

#### CHAPTER L.

##### THE RETURN OF THE VICTORS.

It was a wise thing in Buffalo Bill leaving Silver Sands settlement as he did, before the dance should come, as bad blood would be engendered in the hearts of those whom he had defeated with his Rough Riders.

The start was made before dawn, and they were well on their way when the sun rose.

As the sunlight sent golden rays across the lake the party came upon a camp in a picturesque spot on the shore among the pines.

"It is the camp of the Fair Hermit," said Senor Otega.

"Yes, and they are preparing to take the trail," Texas Jack replied.

Buffalo Bill's eye was upon the Cowboy King, who stood by the splendid roan as though about to mount.

He had heard the hoof-falls approaching and turned his head.

Buffalo Bill raised his sombrero politely, a strange smile upon his face, and the Cowboy King returned the salute stiffly.

He seemed surprised, as it were, at seeing them.

"As I know him, senor, I will halt for a moment and inform him of the death of his cowboy," said Senor Otega, and he turned off the trail.

Buffalo Bill looked back and noted the meeting carefully, having his fieldglass to his eyes.

It was fully ten minutes before the senor overtook the scouts, and then he rode up to the side of Buffalo Bill, who was riding with Texas Jack some paces ahead of the others.

"Well, senor?"

"I told him, and do you know it seemed to fairly hurt him, for his face paled; then he muttered a curse."

"Surprised, doubtless, that one of his men could be so wicked," said Buffalo Bill.

"Perhaps.

"He told me the man had begged to remain to the fandango, and the Fair Hermit had granted him permission to do so.

"I suggested to him that I believed that my two men, and his man, must have been spies of the Secret Foes, but he said that he could not believe such to be the case.

"He asked me if the Alcalde took no steps to detain your man, and I told him that he had, after investigation, discharged him with full acquittal, and he seemed really angered, but said little more, and I left him.

"But, senor, I feel, from what I have seen of the man, he is very bitter against you all for defeating him, and he is none too good, in my opinion, to seek trouble with you when he catches you at disadvantage."

"So I believe, Senor Otega, but we no more fear that Cowboy King than we do the body of poor Rio Grande Dick, tied to his saddle there, and when he wishes to find us, for any purpose whatever, we will be where he can do so."

"True, I well believe that; but an assassin strikes in the dark and in the back."

"Yes, senor, but let me whisper one thing in your ear, and that is that it is my opinion that the days of secret assassins, banded together for crime in this valley are numbered."

"Heaven grant it, Senor Cody," was the fervent answer of the ranchero.

The scouts arrived at the hacienda in time for dinner, and Senor Otega and his men came in to rest for an hour.

Wild Winfield greeted all with a shout of welcome, but his face darkened as he beheld the body of Rio Grande Dick strapped on his saddle, and saw Blue Jacket Bob with his arm in a sling.

"You've been in action, pard," he said.

"With cowardly assassins only, Winfield, and Blue Jacket laid them out, and the end is not yet."

"I hope poor Dick will be still further avenged; but you were the winners, of course?"

"Yes, in everything we entered for, and we have a mighty good sum in gold as the result, with saddles, bridles, spurs and a lot else, for we gave no one else a single prize," said Texas Jack.

"Just what I expected.

"Why, we could not get a bet among ourselves; we all felt sure how the game would go.

"But where is the roan?"

"Traded off with the Cowboy King's horse, the Chief of the Cattlemen on the Fair Hermit's ranch."

"What! Did the chief find a faster horse than the roan?"

"No, not as fast; but he somehow found one he wanted to trade for, and we boys can't just get at the reason why he traded."

The Senor Otega not only remained to dinner, but said he would wait for the burial of Rio Grande Dick, and a grave was dug for the dead scout in the burying ground of the hacienda.

The party of the Hermitess of the Hacienda had passed along the trail, a mile down the valley from the old ranch, while the scouts were at dinner, the man on guard reported.

When the meal was over the dead body of the scout was taken to its last resting place, and as it was lowered into the grave Buffalo Bill recited from memory the service for the dead.

It was a sad scene, and the great, strong men showed that they felt deeply the blow that had befallen them in the loss of their comrade, to whom all were much attached.

When the Senor Otega mounted his horse to leave, Buffalo Bill and Wild Winfield accompanied him to the gate, and the former said:

"You may expect to see me before long, senor."

"I hope so, for you and your comrades will ever be most welcome," and he rode



on after his men, while Wild Winfield, turning to Buffalo Bill, said:

"Now I have something to tell you, chief."

#### CHAPTER LI.

##### THE STRANGE SIGNALS.

"Well, Winfield, what is it, pard?" said Buffalo Bill, in the pleasant way he had of speaking to his comrades.

"I have been standing guard the two nights you were away, for I did not wish to make a mistake."

"You never do."

"I took the gate here at night, soon as the boys brought the cattle in, and I remained on until sunrise."

"Yes?"

"I rigged that seat there against the wall, and, you see, it made me face the cliffs."

"Well?"

"We were not disturbed, saw no one, for Kit Kingdon took the watch half the night in the hacienda, and Broncho Rawlings the other half, the rest of the boys, you know, being out with the cattle by day."

"Yes, that was right."

"Not a sound was heard in the hacienda, and I had no reason to believe a foe came near us; but I happened to glance up the first night just about midnight, and I saw on the cliff, the further one back and the higher one, what I at first supposed was a star."

"But as I looked I saw it move."

"A light, eh?"

"Yes."

"I arose, to be sure I was awake, and then looked again to see if it was a star or a light."

"But it was gone."

"Ah!"

"As I looked it reappeared, and then swung to and fro quietly, a distance of a yard, perhaps."

"Then it was really a light?"

"It was."

"It would appear and disappear, swing like a pendulum, and remain stationary, and this it kept up for an hour or more."

"It was surely a signal of some kind, Winfield."

"It was, but to whom?"

"Did you see it last night?"

"Yes, just as I had the night before, only it lasted longer, and then remained stationary for quite a while, to once more go through the same movements."

"At last I decided to see if it was a beacon, a signal really intended for us, and I lighted a match."

"I allowed it to burn out, then lighted another, and another."

"This I did until fifteen had been thus lighted and burned out."

"And the result?"

"The light was then turned in a circle for fourteen times, like a man swinging a circle round and round his head."

"Fourteen times?"

"Yes, sir?"

"You made no mistake in the count?"

"None."

"And then?"

"I went through the same performance again, lighting fifteen matches and letting them burn out."

"Why fifteen?"

"The number of our band."

"Well?"

"I thought if the signal was for us they would understand it."

"Yes."

"I had a lantern unlighted with me, and determined to light it, when once more I saw that same signal."

"The light swung in a circle?"

"Yes, sir."

"How many times?"

"Fourteen."

"No mistake?"

"None, sir."

"And then?"

"I lighted the lantern and swung it around my head fifteen times."

"With what result?"

"The beacon on the cliff was swung in the same way, but fourteen times, and then it disappeared."

"Then it was a signal to us."

"Surely; but what did it mean, chief?"

"As I understand it, we were fifteen in number, but Ned Linton is a prisoner, and the death of poor Dick could not have been known."

"You are right, sir, that was a signal to us, the fourteen swings of the lantern showing that one of our number was absent; and so it must have been Ned Linton himself."

"We will wait and see, for I will stand guard with you to-night, Winfield."

"But the signals were for us, beyond a doubt, and you have made a very important discovery, for Ned Linton, or some one for him, is telling us just where to find the retreat of the Secret Foes, and where they keep their prisoners."

"We will see what to-night reveals," and Buffalo Bill seemed much pleased with the discovery Wild Winfield had made.

#### CHAPTER LII.

##### BUFFALO BILL STARTS ON A LONE EXPEDITION.

The night came and Buffalo Bill was on guard at the gate with Wild Winfield.

The cattle and horses had not been driven in, as the scouts had returned home, and there were enough for four for night duty and four for day duty, with the others to look to the duties about the hacienda, and be ready for any service they might be called upon to do.

As Buffalo Bill had signified his intention of going on an expedition the next day, he carried his blankets down to the entrance to sleep there, and have Wild Winfield call him when the beacon appeared on the cliff.

But though Wild Winfield watched faithfully all night no sign of the light was seen.

He awoke the chief just at dawn, and so reported to him, asking:

"Now, what does it mean, chief?"

"The only thing I can think of, for its not being shown is that the one who made the signals, and you answered them, feels that he has done his duty."

"I guess that is it, sir."

"And now I think of it, there may be another reason, Winfield."

"What is that, sir?"

"It may be that the guards in that retreat may have been so reduced, by attendance at the tournament, the prisoners found it possible to signal us while they were gone, but since their return cannot do so."

"I never thought of that, sir."

"But you think the outlaws were at the tournament?"

"I am thoroughly convinced of it, Winfield."

"I saw men there who were certainly outlaws, whatever they may appear to be in public."

"Why, there were matched against us in the sports men who ought to have been hanged long ago."

"It may be."

"Did not two of Senor Otega's men and one of the Fair Hermit's cowboys turning traitors prove what they were?"

"It certainly did, and you have a way of getting at facts, chief, that is generally right."

"But you are going away to-day, you said?"

"Yes, and we will go up to breakfast, and then I will prepare for my journey."

They went up to the hacienda, had breakfast, and Buffalo Bill, calling to Texas Jack, said:

"Send but two men out on the herding this morning, pard, for I will need you and four others."

"All right, chief," and but two were sent out to relieve the four on duty.

Then Texas Jack selected four men to accompany him on the expedition Buffalo Bill had hinted at, and they were soon all ready for the trail.

Soon Buffalo Bill came out of the hacienda ready for the trail.

He seemed to have made a change in his clothing, looked as though he had

dressed with considerable care; his boots were blacked and he had evidently taken pains to appear at his best.

"Ah, Jack, you are a little too soon, for I do not wish you to go with me, but to follow me," he said as he saw the scouts all ready.

"All right, sir, just as you say."

"I am going to make a call, in fact, a couple of them, for I shall dine with Senor Otega, and from there go on to the hacienda of the Fair Hermit."

"Do you mean it, chief?"

"Certainly."

"Don't go there."

"Is it the Fair Hermit you distrust, or her cowboys?"

"It is the King of the Cowboys I have no faith in, and his men will do as he tells them."

"I do not doubt that."

"He is bitter over his defeats, as all of them are, and he will seek to do you harm in some way, I am sure."

"My dear Jack, that is just why I want you and the boys along."

"Ah!"

"You are to follow my trail, you know, and, stopping at the Otega's ranch later in the afternoon, some time after my departure from there, he will give you a couple of men to accompany you, guiding you off the direct place to the spot near the hacienda of the Fair Hermit."

"You can then go as near as you dare, meet me upon my departure, and on the return, instead of having one man to waylay, as they will expect, they will find half a dozen, and I will not fall into the trap."

"I see."

"I do not know that they would kill me; I rather think they would not; but just now I wish to take no chances—wish to keep out of trouble—as I am playing a little secret game myself, which you will all be let into as soon as I make a discovery or two I hope to."

"Now, follow in a couple of hours, and when you reach the Otega ranch go there alone, leaving the men in hiding."

With this Buffalo Bill mounted his horse and rode away upon his lone trail.

#### CHAPTER LIII.

##### THE RANCHERO ALLY.

At a brisk gait Buffalo Bill rode along the trail, now well known to him, leading to the home of Senor Otega.

He had not ridden the horse of the Cowboy King, but another nearly as fleet as the roan he had traded off, for the scouts had nothing but fine animals, and could readily have gotten good trades with money to boot, for their horses.

He was watchful as he rode along, as he deemed it very necessary that he should be.

It was within half an hour of dinner time when he reached the Otega ranch, and he was received by the senor and his lovely wife most cordially.

"I have been told of your grand victories, Senor Cody, and I allow I was delighted to hear it all; but it was sad, the killing of your comrade and wounding of another by those traitors," said the senora.

"We must expect such things, senora, and are always prepared for what may come, as men of my calling should be."

"It is a perilous life you lead, and yet see how we, too, have been made to suffer in our lives here."

"Those two men of our ranch I never did like, or really trust, but the senor seemed to have faith in them."

"But you are going to be our guest for several days, I hope?"

"Thank you, no, for I must go on my way this afternoon."

"I am sorry; but we will soon have dinner," and the Senora Otega left the room to see to it, when the senor remarked:

"Now, which way, senor, for I am sorry to see you alone on a trail?"

"I have company, sir, but they are not visible."

"Good!"



"My friend, Texas Jack, will be here this afternoon, and will you give him a couple of men whom you feel that you can really trust as guides?"

"I can give him a dozen men, Senor Cody, but candidly, and with shame I say it, I know of but one man on my ranch whom I would fully trust."

"The fact is, since those two played the traitor I do not know in whom to place confidence."

"They may be all faithful, and yet one may not be, and that one might be the person I select for you."

"That is very true."

"But one man I am sure of, Palma, my cowboy chief, and he will go with you where you please."

"Thanks, senor, he will do; but I thought of two, as the force might divide."

"Still, one will do, and if you will allow him to go with Omohundro (such is Texas Jack's name, you know,) I will feel obliged."

"Certainly."

"But you, senor?"

"I am going to make a visit, senor, to the hacienda of the Fair Recluse."

"Oh, senor!"

"Yes, and I wish you to give me full directions for reaching there."

"I will, yet—"

"Yet what?"

"I do not wish to see you go there."

"Why not?"

"The Cowboy King."

"Is not the Senorita Consuelo a protection upon her own ranch?"

"Yes, but—"

"Well?"

"She will not see you."

"I believe that she will."

"I am sure not."

"I will make the trial at least."

"But why go there?"

"I have a special desire to see her."

"In your mysterious but seemingly sure way, you are working for an end, senor, and I say heaven speed you."

"We have gained one advantage."

"What is it?"

"We have been signaled to from the upper cliff in the range back of the hacienda."

"Glorious!"

"When I came back from my visit to the hacienda of the Senorita Consuelo I will get your cowboy chief to come to the Mission Ranch for a visit of several days, and he will guide us around to the other side of that range, for up there is the retreat of the Secret Foes."

"I believe you are right."

"But I also will go, for you, a stranger, must not run all the risk in working for us here in this valley, who have suffered at the hands of the Secret Foes."

"I will accompany you, senor, and you may need my aid, as well as that of Palma."

"I shall be only too happy to have you go, senor, for I shall go there for work, deadly work, I believe, and I have lost one man killed, as you know, and another wounded."

"And how is the Senor Blue Jacket Bob?"

"Improving rapidly."

"He will, of course, have to remain at the hacienda with two others, to care for it and the cattle, and that will give me ten men, and with you, Palma, and myself there will be thirteen of us; I think a sufficient number for our work."

"I believe you know just what you are going to do, senor, and I am with you; but come, dinner is ready," and the senora appeared at the door to announce it.

#### CHAPTER LIV.

##### ON FORBIDDEN GROUND.

Buffalo Bill rode away from the home of Senor Otega half an hour after he had enjoyed one of the senora's most substantial dinners.

The ranchero was sorry to see him go, yet he was beginning to feel that all the scout undertook he would accomplish.

He had given him full directions for reaching the hacienda of the Fair Recluse.

It was situated down the valley from him, at the foot of the lake, and just a score of miles from the Otega ranch.

Broad pasture lands were upon either side; there were timber lands also, and the hacienda, as strong as a fort, was situated upon a spur of the mountain range, and commanded an extensive view.

As he drew near it, after a brisk ride, Buffalo Bill was glad to discover that there were innumerable hiding places for Texas Jack and his men, and their approach could not be seen, for the timber, by any one in the hacienda.

There were thousands of cattle feeding upon the meadow lands, and a large herd of horses, showing that the Hermitess was by no means poor.

Some of the cowboys herding the cattle gazed at the scout with interest as he rode along, but he seemed neither to avoid or care to meet them.

One, however, rode in such a way as to cross his trail, and he said as he drew near:

"Why, it is Senor Linton."

"Yes, I remember seeing you at the tournament."

"Going to the hacienda, Senor Linton?"

"Yes."

"The Cowboy King is not there."

"I wish to see the Senorita Consuelo."

"She receives no strangers, senor."

"I shall at least try to see her."

"It will be useless."

"Has she not cattle and horses for sale?"

"Yes, senor, but the Cowboy Chief attends to that."

"In his absence who does?"

"You will have to come again, Senor Linton."

"I will ride on, however, and request to see the senorita."

"It will only be refused."

"Very well, I can then turn back."

"But when will the Cowboy King return?"

"To-night, senor."

Thanking the man, Buffalo Bill rode on, and soon approached the heavy gate of the hacienda.

A man stood within, looking through a small window, and said, somewhat rudely:

"The Senorita Caliente entertains no strangers beneath her roof."

"I have not asked it, my man."

"But you will go and say to the Senorita Caliente that the Senor Linton desires to see her for a few minutes."

"I'll go, senor, but she will not see you," and the man spoke more respectfully now, for he had evidently heard of the Senor Linton and his achievements.

He returned within ten minutes and said:

"The Senorita Caliente regrets having to decline to see the Senor Linton, and that she is not able to offer him hospitality beneath her roof."

Buffalo Bill smiled, and taking out of his pocket a notebook, he tore out a leaf and wrote upon it:

"If taken from the wrist the charm is broken."

"The Senor Linton begs to restore the charm."

"Hand this to the senorita, my man," and a silver dollar slipped into the hand prevented any reply, as the man had a refusal upon his lips to bear the message.

But he walked off, and Buffalo Bill waited with no show of anxiety upon his face as to the result.

This time the gatekeeper was gone for a much longer time than before, and when he returned there was a puzzled look upon his face, as he said:

"I'll allow you to enter, senor, for the Senorita Caliente will see you."

He disappeared from the little window, and, to the surprise of the cowboys watching the result half a mile away, they saw the visitor ride within the walls of the hacienda and enter upon what had up to that time been forbidden ground to all strangers.

#### CHAPTER LV.

##### THE FAIR LADY OF THE HACIENDA.

"Well, senor, you have done what no one else has ever done here," said the gatekeeper as Buffalo Bill rode within the walls; "you have entered this hacienda."

"Is it considered such an honor?"

"It is not allowed, and, were the Cowboy King here, he would not admit you."

"My visit is to the Senorita Consuelo, not to her servant, the Cowboy Chief," was the haughty reply.

The gateman winced, for the Cowboy King evidently was all powerful in the hacienda.

Dismounting, the scout began to scrutinize sharply all about him.

Already he had seen that five cowboys were attending the large herd of horses and cattle; then there was the gateman, another servant working in the garden, while a couple of women and a boy were gazing anxiously at him from one of the wings of the commodious dwelling.

The grounds were well kept; there was a garden, with an abundance of flowers in it, a shady retreat or two; every evidence, in fact, of comfort, luxurious ease, and good taste.

The gateman did not lead the visitor into the hacienda, but, halting at the flower-garden gate, said:

"The Senor Linton will find the senorita in yonder arbor."

"She does not intend to have any eavesdroppers, that is certain," he muttered.

A short walk brought him to the arbor, a perfect bower of beauty amid the flowers that were upon all sides.

The senorita arose from a hammock, a book in her hand, as the caller approached.

Buffalo Bill halted in the arched entrance to the arbor, and what he saw was a perfect picture of loveliness.

The scout saw two hammocks swung in the arbor, a small table, and a couple of chairs, a guitar, fans, and some books. And the occupant?

There she stood in a slightly embarrassed way, it seemed, clad in a dress of soft, yellow silk, that clung gracefully about her exquisite form.

Her raven hair hung in two long braids down her back, and the only adornment she wore was a pink rose pinned in her waist.

That she was very beautiful the scout realized as, lifting his sombrero, he bowed low before her.

"Senor Linton, be seated," she said, and she still appeared embarrassed.

"Senorita Caliente, I have no right, perhaps, to intrude myself upon you, knowing the unwritten law of your house that no stranger must enter, but I have done so to return to you a trinket that belongs to you—one I picked up upon the scene when last we met."

As Buffalo Bill spoke, he held out the bracelet found upon the spot where he had rescued the Mexican officer and maiden from the masked man and his four followers.

The face of the fair Mexican flushed and paled in turn, and, stepping forward, she said earnestly:

"Senor, can you ever forgive me for my treatment of you that day, leaving you, as we did, after your saving the senor captain from certain death and rescuing me from the power of cruel foes?"

"Yes; this bracelet must have been torn from my wrist unnoticed by my captors in the struggle."

"You read what is within it, senor, so the charm is broken. I will never wear it again; no, never! For what is there graven has come true—the charm is broken."

She turned her head, and for a moment was silent, when Buffalo Bill spoke:

"I am sorry you no longer have faith in the charm; but I am glad to have returned it to you."

"Senor, I am glad you have done so, for it has given me the chance to meet you, to tell you how I appreciate all you did that day."



"Why we left you so unceremoniously I cannot tell, for my lips are sealed."

"I did not know what had become of you until I saw you enter the lists of contestants at the tournament, and I congratulate you upon your being the victor—you and your comrades."

"I have been told that already you have had your chief kidnapped by the Secret Foes in the valley, and all I can say is that I beg you and your companions will no longer remain here, for harm will surely befall you all."

"Strangers are not tolerated here, and I will see to it that the ransom of your chief is paid, until he, too, can leave, for what do I not owe to you, señor?"

"And who were those foes of yours, señorita?"

"I do not know."

"And the señor captain—did he recover from the cruel treatment they gave him?"

"Yes, señor."

"Señorita, I have a request to make."

"I will grant it."

"I shall not leave this valley until our kidnapped chief goes with us, or is avenged if harm has befallen him; but the favor I would ask is that, when I come again to see you, you will see me."

"I have promised; but you must not come when the Cowboy King is here, Señor Linton."

#### CHAPTER LVI.

##### A PROMISE.

Buffalo Bill's face did not change a muscle at this remarkable request of the Fair Recluse.

The girl looked at him somewhat anxiously, while he answered graciously: "It shall be as you wish, señorita. I shall have no trouble with your Chief of Cowboys, who seems to take to heart his defeat at the hands of my men and myself."

"Did he tell you that two of his men attempted to rob our camp and were killed the night of the fandango?"

"No; I knew not of this," she said quickly.

"Did you not miss two of the men?"

"Yes, but was told that they remained at the fandango."

"They remained to rob our camp of the purses we had received as prizes, and one of Señor Otega's men joined in with them."

"Were they successful?" and the girl's face was strangely white now and stern.

"Not in their attempts at robbing, but they killed one of my comrades and wounded the other. In return for that, the three robbers lost their lives."

"That at least was just punishment, Señor Linton."

"I will make inquiries into this, and see if more of my cattlemen were involved in this attempted robbery."

"No, señorita; let it pass, for we take all chances of protecting ourselves."

"I will now bid you adios and thank you for having received me."

"The thanks are due to you, señor, and I wish you would tell me if in any way I can serve you."

"By allowing me to call again, as you have promised, if I deem it best to come."

"You have my promise."

"And may I ask if you have any idea of who the men were who attacked you that day?"

"I have not."

"Were they not the Secret Foes?"

"No, señor."

"I did not know but they might be," said Buffalo Bill in a peculiar way.

"No, they were not of that band, señor. Their masked leader was a foe to—the Señor Captain, and to me, I know; but, just who he was I am not aware."

"He wanted gold, and revenge as well, it seemed, but he thwarted his purpose as far as getting money was concerned, for, but for you coming, as you so bravely did, he would have killed the Señor Captain, and from me he would have obtained nothing."

"The outlaws were strangers in the valley, Señor Linton, save their chief, and just who he was I do not know, as I have stated."

"Perhaps when I call again, señorita, I may be able to inform you as to his identity."

"Ah! can you? Oh, can you, señor?" eagerly.

"I may," was the cautious reply; and, declining the offer of refreshments, the scout took his leave, the señorita offering her hand as she bade him farewell.

He had gone but a few steps when Señorita Consuelo called to him, and coming rapidly up to where he had halted, she said:

"Señor Linton, this valley is full of dangerous characters, and one knows not whom to trust."

"You are going alone upon a dangerous trail, and I warn you that you may be halted and held up, as they say here."

"Among my own cattlemen you have told me were two who were robbers, and there may be more; so should there be, this will protect you from robbery, perhaps from death. Wear it!" and she took from the silk scarf about her neck a pin of unique design and fastened it upon the lapel of Buffalo Bill's jacket.

"Señorita, I will keep it as a souvenir of you, and should your men turn against me, it will doubtless be a charm to protect me."

"I thank you," and again bidding the beautiful girl good-by, Buffalo Bill left the garden, crossed the plaza to where his horse awaited him, and rode toward the gate.

There stood the keeper, who now saluted him with marked respect, again saying: "You are the first stranger, señor, who ever gained entrance to this hacienda. Buenos noches, señor!"

Out of the walled grounds rode the scout, just as the sun was on the horizon. A smile flitted over the fine face at thoughts which flashed through his mind as he rode slowly away.

Not a cowboy did he see, of those he had encountered on his way to the hacienda, and he noticed that the cattle and horses had been driven further down the valley.

Suddenly he spoke aloud, as twilight deepened around him:

"I will put it to the test!"

#### CHAPTER LVII.

##### A DARING VENTURE.

Buffalo Bill knew that his life was in danger, for the Cowboys of the Hacienda of the Hermitess were known to be a wild and reckless lot.

They had carried things their own way in the former tournaments, for there were four of these gatherings each year, the people of Silver Sands Valley being fond of sport.

Only once before, so Señor Otega had said, had the Señorita Consuelo ever attended the tournaments.

The Cowboy King had, however, been present at four of the jousts, and each time had proven victor.

In the fandango that followed, his cowboys had been much in evidence among the scenes of carousal which had ended in lawlessness and death.

They were known to be a lawless band, keeping together for mutual protection.

Now they had been defeated by the strangers of the Old Mission Ranch; more, they had lost two of their men at the hands of those same men.

That they had been shot down for attempted murder and robbery mattered not; they had been killed, and the wish of the survivors was for revenge. Of all this Buffalo Bill was well aware, and now known to be returning to his ranch by night; alone, the chances were that he would be assaulted—perhaps murdered. He guarded against this danger—Texas Jack and his four comrades had been left in wait; but, as he neared the spot where the guard was to be, the Scout Chief had decided to take a certain risk, and try another plan.

About a mile and a half from the ha-

cienda, just as it was fairly dark, he heard a call from the timber:

"Chief!"

"Ay, ay, Jack!"

"I saw you leave the hacienda, and so kept on ahead until I felt no one would see me join you."

"That's right. Where are the boys?"

"About half a mile further on. You got into the old fort, I saw."

"Oh, yes; saw the Hermitess and had an hour's talk with her."

"You cannot see it now, Jack; but just feel on my coat, here."

"A pin of some kind."

"Yes, a souvenir from the Hermitess, who is fully aware how bad her cowboys are, and supposing that they would tackle me, either to kill me, or to rob me, she gave me this as a charm, to protect me."

"They cannot see it at night."

"No, but their style is not to kill, but to rope a man, and I have a fancy to put it to the test."

"Don't do it, chief!"

"Yes, I have made up my mind to that; so, when we join the boys, I will go on alone. You follow, all of you, about a quarter of a mile behind, and as there is but one trail, you cannot miss the way."

"All right, but I don't like your going alone, chief!"

"I am determined on that, Jack, for a purpose which I will explain later."

"If they don't kill you."

"If they do, avenge me, and as you know my purpose in coming into this valley, carry it out and report to General Carr upon your return that you have done so."

"Yes, and that I avenged you with a vengeance, as we certainly will do if anything happens to you."

"Do so, if you have to; but, I have abiding faith in my destiny, or luck; I was not born to be killed yet awhile, Jack."

"Heaven grant it, Bill!"

"Now, tell me if the Señor Otega sent his Cowboy Chief, Palma, with you?"

"Yes, he is with us, and the Señor Otega also."

"Good! That makes seven of you, and I saw but five of those cowboys from the hacienda yonder."

"I counted seven. There may be more; but, what do we care if they are a dozen?"

"Not much."

They then came upon the party in waiting, and as the Señor Otega grasped the chief's hand, he expressed his great surprise at his having gained admission into the Hacienda of the Hermitess.

Buffalo Bill at once made known what his intention was, and though urged most earnestly not to do so, was firm in his resolve to ride on alone. I came across a place this afternoon where I will be held up, if anywhere, and I took particular notice of it for just such a purpose.

"It is some three miles from here, and in a valley, where a stream runs through a rocky pass, the trail right alongside of it."

"I know the spot well, Señor Chief. Men have been kidnapped there, and killed, as well," said Palma, the Cowboy Chief of the Otega Ranch.

#### CHAPTER LVIII.

##### A VALUABLE SOUVENIR.

As no amount of persuasion not to attempt his daring venture would turn Buffalo Bill from his purpose, no more was said. He soon started on alone, the others following after he had gone some five minutes.

Buffalo Bill remembered that the valley which he had noted as a good ambush, and Palma had said had so been proven, narrowed at that point until the creek and the trail filled up the pass between two spurs of the ranges on either side, making it a gateway of rock, as it were.

There were boulders on each side, pines and every condition for men in hiding to pounce upon a traveler.



The moon was rising as Buffalo Bill neared the spot, and he was glad that it was so, for it gave light in the narrow trail.

Whatever his doubts and fears, his face showed no sign, as the moonlight revealed it plainly.

Another moment and shadows fell upon him; his horse wheeled suddenly in fright, but two lariats settled over the head of the animal, and as many around the body of the rider.

The scout was almost dragged from his saddle by the shock, but his horse was brought to a sudden halt.

He could have used a revolver, but did not then care to do so, and pretended that he was unable to draw his weapons.

"What does this mean?"

"Who are you?" he called out in angry tones.

"You will get better acquainted with us, Senor Linton, before we are done with you," said one, whom the chief at once recognized as the man he had talked with before going to the hacienda of the Hermitess.

"Ah! I know you now."

"You are men from the Hacienda of the Senorita Caliente," he said.

Buffalo Bill saw that five men were before him, four of them holding on to the lassos, which they had thrown, the fifth standing close to him, revolver in hand.

"What if we are?" demanded the leader, insolently, holding the revolver at a ready.

"Then I can command you to respect this pledge, given me by the Hermitess of the Hacienda."

As he spoke Buffalo Bill half raised his pinioned right arm and pointed to the pin given him by the Senorita Consuelo.

The leader stepped closer, caught hold of his jacket, drew it down, and gave a searching glance at the little talisman.

Instantly his manner changed, and he said with a courteous manner:

"I respect it, senor."

"Why you wear it I do not know, but the fact remains that you have it, and we obey."

Turning to his men he then spoke in Spanish, saying quickly:

"The senor wears the Pledge, comrades."

"Release him!"

Before this was done, Buffalo Bill added:

"I would advise you now to make a hasty retreat, for there is a Military Patrol behind me, in search of certain law breakers, and they might mistake you for—"

There was no need to say more, for the five men darted in among the rocks with wonderful alacrity, and a moment after, Buffalo Bill heard them dashing down the valley at full speed.

Instantly he burst forth with hearty laughter, while he said:

"Not so dangerous, after all; but this little souvenir is valuable, and I am glad I have found out just what it is worth."

"I am making discoveries rapidly, and am on a trail that just satisfies me."

"I'll wait here for the others, and I guess I'll let these lassos remain as they are for the boys to see."

Five minutes after Texas Jack and his party came up, they having also heard the flight of the Greaser Cowboys.

They were considerably surprised to find Buffalo Bill seated there on his horse, about whose neck hung two lariats, while a couple more nooses were around the form of the scout.

"This little pin did it, senor, and the men did not wait to set me free, and get their lariats, when I told them a Military Patrol was coming along behind me."

"I am sure that you are on the right track, senor, and know more than you have told us," Otega observed.

"Yes, I think I do; but I wish to be sure before I act, as I hope I will soon be able to do."

They rode on slowly, Buffalo Bill and the Senor Otega side by side.

Suddenly the chief halted.

"Some one is coming at a gallop!" he announced. "Get your lassos ready, men, for we'll rope him."

## CHAPTER LIX.

### LASSOED.

The party were going through lowlands, where the trail ran for a short distance, through a pine thicket.

The pine straw gave back no sound of the falling of the hoofs of the horses, and on each side of the trail the dwarfed growth made a secure hiding place.

A short distance ahead the thicket ended, and the trail wound over a hard soil, giving a metallic ring to the hoof-falls of a horse approaching at a rapid gallop.

At the call of Buffalo Bill, the men ranged upon either side of the trail, in the shadow of the trees.

Buffalo Bill did not touch his lasso, and the Senor Otega had none.

But Texas Jack and his four men, and the Cowboy Chief, Palma, had their ropes ready.

Thus the horseman, for the hoof-falls showed that there was but one, would have a deadly gantlet to run of six lariats.

"You three on the right throw for the horse, the others on the left for the man, so there will be no meeting of coils and failure to catch," said Buffalo Bill.

"But, senor, you do not know who he is," urged the Senor Otega.

"I have an idea, and if I make a mistake, I can ask his pardon; but I think it a case of turn about fair play," was the answer.

The sound of the coming hoofs suddenly ceased.

"He has halted," whispered Otega.

"No, he has struck the pine straw. Look out for him, men!"

A moment more, and there came into view a horseman, coming at a swinging gallop, and the moonlight falling full upon horse and rider revealed them both distinctly.

"Throw!"

As Buffalo Bill uttered the command the six lariats whirled as one.

And every loop went true, while in a voice that had the ring of a trumpet, Buffalo Bill called out: "Surrender, senor, if you value your life!"

The lassos had done their work so well that the order was useless, for the horse was firmly held by three, and the rider was in toils he could not escape.

"Ha! you are the Senor Linton!" cried the prisoner, as Buffalo Bill spurred alongside of him.

"Yes, as you are El Moro, the Cowboy King."

"And why am I thus captured by you, senor. You, whom I deemed an honest ranchero, not a highwayman?"

"Turn about is fair play, senor, for two of your men sought to rob my camp, killing one of my comrades and wounding another in doing so, while, not an hour ago, five cowboys from the hacienda of the Hermitess, believing me alone, captured me just as you have now been roped in."

"As we are in this valley to stay, we wish to be free from the danger that besets us, of being held up by your men in revenge for our having been victorious over you in manly and fair sports, and so I shall hold you as a hostage until I can arrange a plan of safety."

"Your chief, the Senor Cody, would not allow this cowardly act."

"Well, he is a prisoner, and—"

"You are not the Cowboy Chief, for his name is Omohundro."

"He is here, and he acted as captain during the tournament, but I am chief now, until Senor Cody returns. Omohundro will tell you that he is with me in what I do."

"I certainly am," and Texas Jack rode forward, while the Cowboy King said, savagely:

"You are a lot of robbers, and that is why you came to this valley—to rob the people—Caramba! I believe you are the Secret Foes."

"You are right, Senor El Moro; we are Secret Foes, and you are our prisoner."

"Secure him to his saddle, men, and see that he can do no mischief."

This order was obeyed, and as the party was ready for the march again, Senor Otega and Palma came into view.

A bitter oath broke from the lips of the Greaser Cowboy King, followed by:

"You in this disgraceful and cowardly outrage, Senor Otega, against an honest citizen of Silver Sands Valley? You allied with robbers and murderers?"

"Yes, El Moro, I am one of the same kind, if so you will," and Senor Otega rode on with Buffalo Bill in the track once more, Texas Jack riding by the side of the prisoner, the others following as a guard.

"If it is to get your horse back again, Senor Linton, and what gold I have with me, that I am captured thus, you can take the animal, and the belt of gold I have also, and release me."

"No. I have my horse again, senor; your gold, also, if we wish, and I will keep you, as well," was Buffalo Bill's reply, and he rode on rapidly until they came to where the trail led to the Otega Ranch.

"Jack, take the prisoner on with you. There is no need of telling you to watch him well."

"I will be at the hacienda to-morrow night. Have the men all ready to accompany me then," Buffalo Bill ordered.

"All right, chief!" and the party rode on with the prisoner, Buffalo Bill turning off with the Senor Otega and Palma, the cowboy.

"Well, senor, I confess I am all in the dark as to what your motive is in making El Moro a prisoner," said Otega, as they rode along the trail together toward the ranch of the Mexican.

"To-morrow we will have a talk over it, senor, and then you will see just what the game is that I am playing."

"If I am right, you will be satisfied; if I am wrong, I will accept the consequences."

## CHAPTER LX.

### TO START ON A TRAIL.

The ranch of Senor Otega was reached a little before midnight, and the host and his guest at once retired, Cowboy Chief Palma being told to come to the hacienda for breakfast at eight o'clock.

He was there on time, and the three men were well rested after their hard ride of the day before.

The senora had a most tempting breakfast ready, and when it had been dispatched, the senor, his guest, and Palma went into the private office of the ranchero for a talk, as the scout had requested.

"Senor Otega," began Buffalo Bill, when the three were seated, "since I have been in this valley, now nearly a month, I have had my eyes wider open than, perhaps, you may have thought."

"I have discovered a wheel within a wheel, and I am now certain that no delay should be allowed in striking a blow to rid you good people of the curse upon you."

"Very true, Senor Cody."

"One thing is certain, and that is, you have for two years, as I understand it, submitted to a tax upon you, which you have been powerless to throw off."

"This has not been from cowardice, for there are many brave men in this valley; but it has been because you were compelled to submit to the commands upon you to save your loved ones from some unknown and terrible fate."

"Very true, senor."

"Who these Secret Foes are you do not know, do not even dare guess, for fear of other evils being visited upon you."

"Step by step they have advanced against you, until, as I now know, counting my comrade, Ned Linton, they have kidnapped in this valley no less than thirty-nine people."

"They have also killed in capturing, or put to death to enforce their demands, as I learn, no less than nine people, sev-



eral of whom have been women and children.

"This has made them so feared that it has given them their power.

"They have a retreat where their prisoners are kept under a guard so secure that escape has been impossible, even with brave men.

"Ned Linton, even, has not been able to escape, and I had great belief in his being able to do so.

"Now I have made one discovery, aided by my men, and that is that the retreat of these Secret Foes is in the range back of the Mission Ranch, which I occupy.

"That range, the higher one, is supposed to be impassable for at least a dozen miles.

"It may be to horses, and the fact that no horses are tracked there proves this; but it is not impregnable to men on foot, nor even to women and children.

"Now, I'll tell you that I intend to delay no longer, but to start on the trail at once, and I wish you, Senor Palma, to tell me all you know about the approach to that range, and which will be our best way to get there, either by going beyond my ranch, and thus on around, or having my men meet me at the point where we gave up the pursuit of Ned Linton.

"Now, what do you say?"

"I believe you are right, Senor Cody, for the retreat can be nowhere else but in that range.

"I have followed along its base for many a mile, but saw no place where a horse could ascend its steep sides. There are several places where men could climb the cliffs, only one never thinks of going anywhere on foot, as you men of the far north do.

"Now, I remember that, though the country is barren and rocky, rugged and forbidding, a considerable stream winds in toward the range, almost in the rear of your hacienda, yet, of course, fully a dozen miles from it over the range. There may be a break there; in fact, there doubtless are several, through which even horses might pass into the mountains, though to do this they must enter the water several miles above, for on the valley side the bank is too precipitous to get down, and too high."

"And how deep is the stream, Senor Palma," asked Buffalo Bill, who had listened most attentively to what the Cowboy Chief had said.

"I should not think the average was over a couple of feet in depth, though in places it may be much deeper, in fact is."

"Then we must go prepared to swim our horses, if need be."

"Do you mean to ride down the bed of the stream, senor?"

"Yes; that now is my plan."

"It will be terribly slippery."

"Have your horses rough shod, as I will have mine, for you, of course, will accompany us, Senor Otega, you and Palma?"

"Oh, yes, Senor Cody, we would not wish to be left behind."

"Then see to the shoeing of your horses; take an extra one along for fear of an accident; prepare provisions for a several days' trip, and meet me at nightfall at the place, Palma, that I told you we gave up looking further for Ned Linton, for I will be there with my men, at least ten of them. We may need that many," was Buffalo Bill's reply.

Half an hour after he was on his way to the Mission Ranch.

#### CHAPTER LXI.

##### THE START.

Buffalo Bill rode at a rapid pace toward the ranch, and arrived there before the afternoon was half over.

On the way he did not meet a soul, and only passed one ranch.

"Well, chief, I am mighty glad to see you, for I was anxious until we saw you coming," was Texas Jack's greeting.

"I saw no one to trouble me, Jack; but how is your prisoner?"

"Safe, but mad clean through. I'll know every oath in the Spanish tongue if he stays with us long."

"Jack, I am going to start on a trail to-night, and I wish you to go, and eight of the boys besides.

"Winfield can remain in charge of the hacienda, and Blue Jacket Bob, of course, as he is wounded, and Haskell and Lipscomb."

"All right, chief; we'll all be ready."

"Take your best horses, and I wish to take along four or five extra animals. Get the boys to work at once shoeing all of the horses rough shod—yes, so rough that they can climb a mountain.

"I'll have Wild Winfield get provisions for us, and I wish to be ready to start as soon as it is dark."

"We'll be on hand."

"Shoe the horses where no one can see you from the cliffs, and I'll tell Lipscomb and Haskell, when they drive the cattle in to-morrow night to keep them up."

"I guess we are going to start on a trail you know the end of, chief," said Texas Jack, with a smile.

"Yes, and I'll tell you what it is as we ride along to-night."

"Now I wish to go and see that horse of the Cowboy King's—I mean the one he rode here."

With this, Buffalo Bill went to the corral in the rear of the hacienda, where the horses kept up for use were turned loose, and he looked closely at the animal which the Cowboy King had been riding when he was captured. After a moment's inspection, he muttered:

"I thought so."

Then he had a look at the horse he had traded his roan for, and remarked, aloud:

"You are all right again, old fellow, and I'll need your services to-night."

Going into the hacienda he found Texas Jack had the men ready to begin the horseshoeing.

"Well, Blue Jacket Bob, how are you getting on?"

"All right, chief, and I wish I could go with you to-night."

"There is just as important work to be done here, Blue Jacket, for the hacienda is to be guarded, the cattle looked after, and I have a prisoner I am most anxious to keep secure."

"He'll be here when you want him, chief."

"If his men suspect that we had captured him, Wild Winfield, and should come here after him, just tell them if they attempt his rescue you will kill him before their eyes."

"Shall I do so, chief, if that threat does not hold them back?" asked Wild Winfield.

"Yes; when you see that you can do no more, and that he must otherwise escape, kill him."

"But I do not believe his men know of his capture, and they may not be anxious about his not returning for a day or two yet."

"But when they do suspect he is in trouble, you think they will look to us for him, sir?"

"Yes, so be on your guard while we are away."

"I will; and, though we are but few to remain behind, we will make them think we are a dozen."

"I have no doubt of that, Winfield."

Having seen that everything was ready for the start, or would be by the time it was nightfall, Buffalo Bill went into the room where the prisoner was confined.

He found that Texas Jack had made him as comfortable as circumstances would admit. A bed had been made for him, some books were on the rude table, a hammock swung for him to loll in, and he had been given plenty to eat, but most of the food remained untasted before him.

To make sure of his not escaping, irons had been put upon his ankles, and that he resented his capture and confinement was shown by his uttering a vengeful

oath in Spanish as Buffalo Bill entered the room.

"Senor El Moro, I have come to have a talk with you," announced the scout.

"Have you come to explain this outrage upon me and set me free?"

"I have come to tell you that you shall remain a prisoner here until I return from an expedition which I start upon to-night."

"When I return I will talk to you about your freedom."

"And when I am free you shall suffer for this, you and your vile band of cut-throats, for I will drive you out of this valley."

"Do not get violent or make threats, El Moro, for you are in no condition to do so."

"Your men were the ones to begin the war against my comrades, and now we are determined to strike back, and—"

Buffalo Bill paused, startled by the look on the man's face.

It had turned deadly pale, and his eyes were riveted upon the pin which he wore on his coat.

"Where did you get that pin?" he demanded.

"That! Oh, yes, you recognize it, do you?"

"Well, it was given to me by the Senorita Consuelo, in return for a bracelet which I took to her, one that my chief, Rancho Cody, intended to take, I know, but as he was captured by the Secret Foes, I concluded that I would carry it to her."

"I had just returned from the hacienda, when we captured you."

"Are you telling me the truth?"

"Certainly; I am above lying to any man."

"She gave it to you?"

"The senorita did. She told me it would protect me, did any of your cowboys seek to harm me for the victory I had won over you."

"As I understand it, this pin made me a kind of honorary member of your Cowboy Band, and it served me well when five of your men did lasso me, for they released me when they knew that I wore it. But, I'll talk with you upon my return; now it is growing late, and I must be off," and, unheeding the appeal of the prisoner to answer him several questions, the scout left him alone.

Half an hour after, the men had had supper, and as darkness fell, they mounted and rode away, their chief at their head.

#### CHAPTER LXII.

##### THE TWO GUIDES.

The ride of the scouts to the rendezvous appointed with the Senor Otega and Palma was made at a brisk gait, and the two men were found to be waiting for them.

"You are more than prompt, senor," remarked Buffalo Bill.

"Something tells me that you are going to be successful to-night, and I am anxious, most anxious," was the answer.

"Then we will start as soon as our horses have had a little rest. Meanwhile I will tell Chief of Cowboys Palma my plan."

Palma was called, and came with Texas Jack to where Buffalo Bill and Otega stood, and the Chief of Scouts said:

"I have a plan to propose to you, senor."

"I am at your service, chief."

"You know that I made an exchange of horses with the Cowboy King?"

"Yes, sir."

"Now I have that horse here to-night, and shall ride him."

"Yes, senor."

"When we captured the Cowboy King he was riding my roan, and I wish you to look at his hoofs, please."

The roan stood near, having also been brought along, and Palma looked at first one hoof, then the other, Rancho Otega and Texas Jack watching him meanwhile with considerable interest.

"I see nothing, senor."



"Then you try, Jack."

This the Texan did, and said, immediately:

"He is not shod as when you had him, sir."

"That is it."

"Now see if the Cowboy King's horse is not shod as my horse is."

"He certainly is."

"You told me, Senor Palma, that to follow the bed of that stream along the base of the range, the horses must be rough shod, and these horses are so shod."

"That is a fact, sir."

"Well, as my roan's shoes have been changed since I owned him, it proves that he was newly shod for a purpose—which purpose, to my mind, is for going along the bed of that stream."

"Chief, you are right. That is just it, and as we had our horses rough shod to-day we can go that way, all of us," declared Palma, with enthusiasm.

"And, more than that, we will have two good guides to show us the way."

"The horses!" cried Texas Jack.

"Yes, my roan was ridden there by the Cowboy King, as his horse had doubtless often been."

"Why, Senor Cody, does that mean that you suspect the Cowboy King of being one of the band of Secret Foes?" cried Senor Otega, with intense surprise.

"I not only suspect him, senor, but I am sure that he not only is one of the band of Secret Foes, but is really their leader, and if I do not prove my words I will never make another prophecy," was Buffalo Bill's emphatic rejoinder.

This charge against the Cowboy King was a great surprise to Senor Otega and Palma, even Texas Jack being amazed at it.

But Palma was not long in replying, and said earnestly:

"Now that you have opened my eyes, Senor Cody, I am sure that you are right, for the charge you make explains many things I could not before account for."

"Yes, sir, you are right."

"A short time will show whether I am or not."

"Mount all!" came the decisive order.

"Palma, as you know the way, mount the Cowboy King's horse, and I will ride the roan, for I am confident, once their heads are turned toward the spot to which they have been ridden, they will take us there without guidance."

Palma looked at Buffalo Bill with undisguised admiration, and Senor Otega said:

"Well, senor, I do not wonder at your success, for you see every vantage, everything against you, and leave nothing undone."

The scouts were accustomed to having their chief spring surprises upon them, but this last one particularly pleased them.

Mounting, the party set off at once, Palma riding ahead with Buffalo Bill, one astride the Cowboy King's racer, the other on the roan.

The moon had risen and fully lighted the way, Palma guiding, and after a few miles they came to the banks of the stream, where it turned in under the lofty range.

At one place both horses, of their option, turned down through a break into the river.

It was a spot where game from the mountain descended to water, and as the horses did the same, it was shown that both had been there before.

Halting for a drink, their bridles untouched by their riders, the animals held on down the stream, the racer of the Cowboy King taking the lead, as though accustomed to do so.

Turning here and there, deftly avoiding dangerous places and deep pools, he continued on, and the good of having had the horses all sharp shod was seen by one and all of the scouts.

A ride of a couple of miles down the stream, over the slippery bed of rocks; then the two horses stepped out of the stream just where a clump of willows

hid a split in the rocky bank, through which two animals could pass side by side.

Up this they went. It was a steep climb that led up to a timbered plateau.

Beyond this was a little valley at the entrance to a large canyon, and before them the scouts suddenly beheld half a hundred horses feeding, lariats being stretched as a barrier across the narrow entrance to the lowland.

"We have found their retreat," was Buffalo Bill's quiet comment.

#### CHAPTER LXIII.

##### A HIDDEN CAMP.

"There is their camp, and you see a sentinel on duty, for there he stands in the moonlight."

All looked as Buffalo Bill indicated, and beheld a man standing upon what appeared to be a stockade wall, running across the canyon from cliff to cliff.

The scouts had left their horses a mile down the canyon in the meadowland with the animals found there, and continued their way on foot.

To have ridden up the canyon would have been impossible on account of the ruggedness of the trail.

The canyon was a narrow one, with walls of rock a full hundred feet or more in height upon either side.

A stream ran down it, and when they had come upon the sentinel the canyon widened beyond into a beautiful valley of half a hundred acres, but all overhung with that precipitous wall of rock, as the moonlight revealed.

The stockade wall across the canyon was all of twenty feet in height. It had a walkway along the top, with a shelter for the sentinel just over a narrow gate that entered the inclosure.

The sentinel was walking to and fro and had a rifle in his hand.

"I want him," said Buffalo Bill, and creeping forward in the shelter of some pines, his lasso was thrown, and, the next instant, the man was dragged to the ground with a fall that stunned him to insensibility.

"Bring him to, Doc, and see what he knows, while I lasso the sentry box, rather than wait for him—no, here is a large key, and it must be to the gate."

But the key did not work from the outside of the gate, so Buffalo Bill lassoed the sentry box; the noose caught firmly, and he went up, hand over hand, to the top of the wall.

There he saw a ladder, the lower end drawn up by a block and tackle.

This he lowered, and reaching the gate on the inside, he soon found the massive lock, which the key fitted; in fact, there were three similar locks.

Each one the same key fitted, and it took but a moment for the chief to open the heavy log door in the wall, and allow his men to enter.

"Has the man recovered?"

"Not yet, sir."

"Never mind; just tie him."

"See, there is a cabin at each end of this wall, and there is where the guards sleep, but how many there are of them I do not know."

"Those lights up the canyon, which widens here, you see, into a valley, must be the camp of the prisoners, for there is a wall of rock all around their place, and the brook runs through holes cut in the stockade, as you observe."

A few more minutes and the unconscious sentinel was bound; then Buffalo Bill and five followers went toward one cabin, Texas Jack and the balance of the party toward the other. The doors were open, and that sleeping men were within was certain, from the hard breathing plainly heard.

"Ho, men turn out, for the chief is here!" called out Buffalo Bill, sternly.

Out of the cabin came four men, hardly awake, and in an instant they looked into the revolvers of the scouts, just as Texas Jack and his party aroused two savage dogs.

A couple of shots ended the brutes, and out of the cabin dashed half a dozen

men in alarm, while, emboldened by the sight of so few men, and the belief that their comrades could aid them, the party from the first cabin attempted resistance.

Revolvers rattled merrily for a moment; cries, curses, and then silence.

The men in the cabin had been subdued, though not until Broncho Rawlings and Pinto Paul had been shot dead in the short but desperate fight of the outlaws, half of whom had been killed ere the others cried for quarter.

"Jack, hold the entrance, while I press on to the camps, for there may be more there," cried Buffalo Bill.

But, as he and those who followed him, Senor Otega and Palma being with him, ran up the valley, lights were seen flashing before them; cries were heard, the voices of men, women and children commingled; then there came a shot, followed by the words: "I have killed the only guard here, Chief Cody, so all is clear."

"It is Ned Linton's voice!"

"The hidden camp is ours," cried Buffalo Bill, and he came to a parklike spot, through which the little stream ran, where there were beautiful trees, and a dozen small cabins scattered here and there.

And from these cabins came running men, women and children, crying wildly in both English and Spanish:

"We are saved! we are saved!"

"Well, chief, I knew you would get here, and glad am I to see you, for this is the only place I saw that I could not escape from," and Ned Linton grasped the hand of his chief, just as Senor Otega found his loved daughter, the Senorita Lulita, who rushed into her father's arms with a cry of joy.

"They had me safe, Chief Cody, for there is no break to these cliffs, and a sentinel stood yonder each night, on that platform, thirty feet up the rocks, you see."

"He drew his ladder up after him, but from there he can go up the mountain to the top of the range, and thus through a cave into the hacienda, a stairway coming up through the walls, and a trap in the ceiling letting one down into the corridor."

"It is a great scheme, and I have heard it all, for they never expected a rescue here."

"That is the way they got into the hacienda to play ghost, and thence into the grounds, and the mountain lion you killed was a pet, while they have two fierce bloodhounds here to guard us."

"We are all here, and have been treated well, men, women, and children, and allowed the freedom of the valley."

"The only weapon any of us has is this small revolver, which the Senorita Lulita managed to conceal and gave to me. It was with it I killed the sentinel up there on his perch. We can throw a lasso, climb up, and thus find our way down into the hacienda."

"But, who do you think is the chief of these Silk Lasso Sharps, as they love to call themselves?"

"I know, Ned; it is the Cowboy King, El Moro. He is safe in our hacienda, for we have him a prisoner," and Buffalo Bill turned, as Senor Otega came up with all the band of captives to grasp the hand of their gallant rescuer.

#### CHAPTER LXIV.

##### THE SECRET OUT.

The secret way into the hacienda was found the next day, Texas Jack and several of the men going that way, while the balance were to escort the captives around by the stream, where they could depart for their homes.

The dead men were buried, and the five outlaw prisoners were put in irons and carried through, by Texas Jack, to the hacienda.

Half a hundred fine horses were found in the meadow, saddles, bridles, weapons, and the gold and jewelry which the different captives had had on their person when captured, but no other booty.

When he had issued his orders as to



what should be done, Buffalo Bill started on alone, ordering Lone Star Sam, Mustang Frank, Wichita Wil, and Kit Kingdon to follow under the guidance of Cowboy Captain Palma, to the hacienda of the Fair Hermit, Senor Otega being left in command of the rescued captives and others at the camps.

Buffalo Bill, mounted upon his matchless roan, rode rapidly on his way, arriving at the hacienda in the afternoon.

He was at once admitted by the gatekeeper, and found Senorita Consuelo in the little arbor in the garden.

"Senorita, I told you that I wished to see you again, and I am here.

"I do not desire to make war upon a woman, and, more, I do not believe you intentionally guilty of being a leader, as it were, of the Secret Foes—nay, hear me, for the Cowboy King is my prisoner, and the hidden camp is in my possession."

"Thank heaven! And may the Virgin bless you, senor!"

The expression was too fervent to bear deceit; and when the beautiful woman had heard the whole story she made known her own sad history.

She had wedded, two years before, a man whom she believed to be an officer in the Mexican Army, and came with him to that house, which she had inherited.

After a few days she had discovered that he was an outlawed officer, and, completely at his mercy, she had been compelled to submit to his dictations, though only lately had she known that he was the leader of the Secret Foes.

To deceive her he had often, after some weeks' absence, returned in his uniform, pretending to have come from his regiment, and it was when she had met him upon one such return, and was riding with him home, that they had been lassoed and captured by that masked man and his four followers, from whom Buffalo Bill had rescued them.

Neither she nor her husband, El Moro, knew who those men were, and when Buffalo Bill was beating them back he had made her fly to the Old Mission Ranch. Once she had discovered that it was his retreat, and they had been in hiding there while the scout had been searching for them.

Once she had truly loved El Moro, but long before her love had turned to detestation, and she had been biding her time to one day free those captives and give the outlaws over to justice.

But Buffalo Bill had arrived, and he and his Rough Riders had been the rescuers of the many captives of the Silk Lasso Sharps.

"How many men on your ranch here are secret members of that band, Senora El Moro?" asked the scout.

"No, no, do not call me by that hated name! Let me still be Consuelo Caliente," petitioned the woman, and then, answering the question, she said:

"There are five of the cattlemen, those who lassoed you, for I knew of that, and that you put the pin to the test.

"My servants, and they alone, are not in the secret of El Moro's guilt."

"Do you like this place, Senorita Caliente?"

"I hate it!"

"Then take my advice and leave at once, with your servants, and let me assure you that you can resume your maiden name, for you will be a widow very soon."

"Oh, senor, I will be rejoiced to know that I am free. He deserves death for his countless crimes, for he has been merciless to all.

"But I will atone all in my power for his deeds. I have a list here of each man of the band who is a spy, one of the servants or cowboys upon each ranch. You shall have the names, and can capture them, for they have been guilty in betraying captives into their hands.

"I would that I could tell you where the gold is El Moro has received as ransom money, but he alone knows. I am fairly well off, and if you will give me

the sums the captives have paid for their release, I will restore it, so far as I can, unless you can force him to yield his ill-gotten gains."

"No, senorita, you need not do that, for I think he can be made to disgorge.

"But, let me tell you that the masked man who captured you was Landlord Buriel. I recognized him by a ring which he wore, and he remembered me, you may recall, and lately I knew where I had seen him before, he having been a desperado in the Northwest.

"I have also sent for him, in your name, for one of his men that day came to me and confessed the whole plot—that he was to get El Moro's money, and then take his life, after which he intended to force his attentions upon you, he being in love with you.

"As a member of the Secret Foes and El Moro's lieutenant we can hang him, you see."

"Oh, senor, what do I not owe to you!" exclaimed the woman, her whole form quivering with deep emotion.

#### CHAPTER LXV.

##### CONCLUSION.

The five cowboys of the hacienda of the Hermitess were cleverly entrapped by Consuelo, and the scouts arriving soon had them in charge, and with their chief started back over the trail.

Upon the way a halt was made for the night at the Otega Ranch, and, looking at the list of spies, Buffalo Bill found that the man killed the night of the fandango had been the one.

The blessings showered upon the Rough Riding Rescuers by Senor Otega, his wife, and daughter made them feel glad that they had accomplished so much, and they went on their way rejoicing the next morning, the senor and Palma accompanying them and their prisoners.

When they arrived at the Mission Ranch they found that the scout sent after Landlord Buriel had returned, and that Texas Jack had already made him a prisoner.

Sending out to the ranches for the cattlemen on the list of spies, only a few were captured, the rest having fled in dismay.

To the Senor Otega, at the request of the scores of rancheros gathered at the Mission Ranch, the Chief of Scouts delivered the prisoners, the Cowboy King, Buriel, and the others, fifteen in all; while the daring leader, refusing to make known the hiding place of his gold, Buffalo Bill said:

"I leave him to you to persuade, Senor Otega, and you and your comrades will doubtless turn them over to the law for just punishment, for we have accomplished our mission here, and must start northward with our horses and cattle, the latter being borrowed to aid in our plot."

\*Refusing the offers of reward which the grateful rancheros showered upon them, and feeling well repaid in the discharge of duty, not to speak of the prizes they had won, and the belts of gold captured from the outlaws, the Rough Riders started on their trail northward, cheered to the echo by those they had served so well.

They pushed their cattle briskly to camp beyond Silver Sands settlement, which they left well to their left, and were pulling out the next morning when Palma overtook them.

"The Senor Otega sent me on to say, sir, that the prisoners were tried yesterday by the rancheros, found guilty, and were hanged, every one of them, at sunset, the Cowboy King refusing to the last to tell where his gold was hidden.

"Well, that was what I call quick justice, but it goes here, and I guess it is all right, for no guilty man escaped through technicality of the law and the trickery of lawyers," was Buffalo Bill's comment; and, bidding Palma good-bye, the Rough Riders went on their way.

The trail was kept up to the Government corrals, the horses and cattle were returned in safety, save the animals that

had been captured in the camp of the Secret Foes, which fell to the captors; and just two months after leaving Fort Lyon Buffalo Bill reported to Gen. Carr, the Department Commander, what had been accomplished by the Rough Riding Rescuers, three of whom had been left to their last sleep in the Arcadian Valley of the Silver Sands.

THE END.

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